Interview with Leonardo Neher

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR LEONARDO NEHER

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is October 18th, 1989. This is an interview with Ambassador Leonardo Neher. I am Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Ambassador Neher, to start off with, how did you become interested in foreign affairs? But first could you give a little of your background, education, and so forth?

NEHER: I had one year of college in the town where I grew up, Akron University, Akron, Ohio. That was 1940 to 1941, on the eve of the war. I had gotten an exemption from the mandatory ROTC program, the first, I guess, that Akron University had given, on the grounds of being a conscientious objector, a member of the Church of the Brethren, a Pennsylvania-Dutch style church with a strong commitment to the principle of conscientious objection to military service. If you were enrolled in ROTC, you would get an exemption, or deferment, until you finished your studies and completed the ROTC training. You then you went into the Army as an officer. But because I had gotten an exemption from ROTC I was going to be drafted—this would have been in 1942. In 1942 I enlisted, preempting the draft. I joined the Signal Corps Reserve. A friend of mine had been in the Reserve, the Signal Corps Reserve, and liked it. I joined it and did about nine months of training as a reservist, then was inducted into the Army in '43. After basic training, I

went overseas, first to North Africa, arriving at Casablanca, and after a few days moving on to Oran, Algeria, I stayed there for a month or two in an infamous “repple depple “(replacement depot), and then was sent on to Naples, then to Anzio, and to Rome, and there my Signal Corps unit stayed until 1946. I was a private at this time with a unit that put together special detachments to service other Fifth Army units. I worked with French, Polish, British and New Zealand units, among others.

Q: The Italian campaign with the 5th Army was just loaded with the most diversified international force that has ever been fielded.

NEHER: Right, and we worked with some of those. We did some field telephone work with artillery batteries and armored units wiring up communications for them. But most of the time we stayed in Rome and worked there. Towards the latter part of my stay there, which was almost two years, it was entirely in Rome. We did a lot of work on telephone installation, repair, pole line construction, and so forth. By the time I left I was a Staff Sergeant, Technician Third Grade.

All this has a bearing on the Foreign Service. It was my first experience with anything foreign. In Akron, Ohio, when I was growing up I was far removed from anything foreign. I had never heard a foreign language spoken. That does not include the academic study of Latin in high school, of course, intoned by my teachers in soporific voices. When I got to Morocco I was immediately fascinated by the sound of French. Then, in Italy, I jumped into language study right away, and I learned it very fast, and I was very fluent in it. It wasn't the best quality, it wasn't the most erudite quality, I was after all a soldier in wartime. But I loved the language, I loved studying the language, and it opened up all a lot of Italian doors. I met friends and their Italian families, went to their homes for dinner, played tennis with them, argues politics at a time of effervescence.

When I came back then to the United States, I was looking for something in my educational program that would lead to some type of involvement in foreign affairs. I knew

nothing about the Foreign Service, didn't know it existed. I wanted to enroll in the college of the University of Chicago but my discharge from the army came too late in the academic year and all places were filled, so I got into the only university near my home that would accept me, Bowling Green State University. I finished my undergraduate studies there in two and a half years, two years and one summer session. I chose French as a major, and I was studying Spanish on the side by myself. I did political science as a minor.

At graduation, I was introduced to the uncle of a classmate who seemed very progressive and challenging. He was a businessman from Chicago and was looking for somebody with drive and imagination, which I had. He offered me a sales job with unlimited possibilities, or so it seemed, and I couldn't resist that offer. It turned out to be a mistake on my part to accept it. I lost about two years there after graduation. Then I entered graduate school at the University of Chicago, finished with a Master's Degree in 1952, took the Foreign Service exam in '52, and passed it. Actually, I'd taken it twice before, but failed it— a 68 or a 69, or whatever. I finally passed it. It was that old three-and-a-half- day written exam. You had to pass the language exam as part of it, which I did. I passed it in 1952 but then, because that was in the middle of the McCarthy era, and the need to re-do so many security clearances, I didn't get mine until late in 1954. They ran into all kinds of problems in my background—that conscientious objector business, some leftist associations I had had in high school and college. I was interested in domestic and international politics even when I was a student in high school, and I had associated with some people who were in the Young People's Socialist League. I wasn't a member but they were good friends of mine. And also I was known to have bought copies of the communist Daily Worker, and of a German propaganda publication, Facts in Review, a propaganda publication out of New Jersey. So information in the FBI files must have led State security people to conclude that I was a dangerous leftist. They couldn't decide what I was. So they had to interview me, and re-interview me, and finally they concluded that I was OK. In 1954 I was invited for the oral exam. At that time State did the written exam, then conducted the investigation, and finally gave the oral exam. The very manipulable policy was to score

the oral exam not only on the basis of performance in the exam itself but on anything else the Board of Examiners knew about you—i. e., the results of the investigation. So they had a convenient way at that time, at least this is the way I saw it then and also later when looking back from my own experience as staff director of the Board of Examiners, to fail a candidate on the oral exam without having to explain that there was something in the background investigation that they didn't like. We can't do that now, of course, as you know from your own experience on the Board of Examiners.

So I assumed that because of my controversial background, I was not going to be passed in the oral exam. But, surprise, surprise, the panel passed me in spite of some rather impertinent answers I gave in the belief that the panel had already decided to fail me. But the panel chairman...

Q: Cromwell Riches probably.

NEHER: Yes, he was the one who announced the results to me. I'll never forget that moment. It was really very heartening in some ways. This was a moment of real hysteria in the United States.

Q: Because of McCarthy.

NEHER: McCarthy, and we had Scott McLeod as head of security at the State Department. A number of conservative Senators and Congressmen, along with conservative journalists, were pushing him, encouraging him, and supporting him. And not long before I had my oral exam he spoke to the DAR, saying in essence, “We're not going to take any more of these pinkos into the Foreign Service.” And, of course, I was pretty obviously a pinko from that bastion of leftism, the University of Chicago. But after the oral exam, in which I really leaned over backward to appear more contentious, and more radical than I was, suggesting that the blacks, for example, were not going to be able to achieve any kind of opportunity or any attain integrity in our society without the catalyst of violence. The panel was disturbed by that. I defended the rights of labor unions

to move directly into political campaigns, and strive for more than just wages and working conditions. The more astute members of the panel detected, however, that I might not be so dangerous after all. I remember that when they asked me about publications that I preferred, I started out with The Nation and the New Republic, knowing that MacCloud had pulled them off the shelves at the State Department as being leftist publications. And then they asked—one of them was perceptive enough to see that I was overstating it, and he said, “Which ones do you actually pay for? Which ones do you subscribe to?” It turned out to be The New York Times and Time Magazine. And, of course, at that point some of the house of radical cards fell in.

But afterward, when Cromwell Riches told me I passed it the exam, he said that the some members of the panel had thought that I was in fact more radical than I appeared, and I was trying to appear conservative. He said, in effect, that they had asked him to say that the Foreign Service was a conservative organization, usually, and outspoken dissent was not really very well seen. I asked him, “Does that mean I've passed with conditions of any kind?” Because I was not going to accept conditions. He said, “No, it's just the panel asked me to state, in telling you that you had passed, that it was important to know that the Foreign service did not welcome outspokenness on controversial issues.” When he had finished, he came around the desk, shook my hand and said, “I really liked your performance. I wish everybody who came here was as outspoken, and honest, and direct as you.” Here in the vortex of McCarthyism, hearing such words from the Director of the Board of Examiners, I thought that it was evidence that the State Department was pretty tough, and could resist even McCarthy style pressures.

Well, that was '54, so it had taken two years from the written exam to the oral. But when I passed they wanted me immediately. I went into the Foreign Service without an A-100 class, the only year, as far as I know that had no junior officer class.

Q: I was in the first class in some time which was in July of '55. It was the first to get a class together as Class 1.

NEHER: Right. So I was sworn in on November 5, 1954, and assigned immediately to an overseas post. I was told to get ready, pack, and get off. And I had never been in the State Department, didn't know what to do first, what support and help the Department would give me to get me to the post. So I bumbled and stumbled all the way from Washington to my first post in Ankara.

Q: What did you do in Ankara?

NEHER: I was assigned as Vice Consul. I did Consular Affairs for the whole two-and-a-half years except for a stint of perhaps four or five months in the Political Section when my replacement had arrived and there wasn't enough fiscal year money for me to return to the U.S. for home leave and transfer before the new year began.

Q: Well, we're going to be obviously concentrating on the latter part of your career, but what was your impression of the Foreign Service when you were in Ankara? You came, I take it, with a certain almost chip on your shoulder. What was your impression?

NEHER: I was still the very liberal product of my academic background, of course, so I saw those around me through a political prism, and I found the Foreign Service at that post to be very conservative compared to my own political environment in Chicago. Both Ambassadors who were there during my tour of duty, and the head of the Political Section —a really stiff New Englander—were very conservative. Foy Kohler came as the Deputy Chief of Mission after he had had a security problem at VOA. The Turkish government was cracking down on dissent at the time and had arrested several journalists. I was shocked to hear him say at one staff meeting that it was probably a good move on the government's part to make those arrests. But as I grew in the Foreign Service I realized that rather than “conservative” views, these were more often very pragmatic ones, looking after U.S interests in a rather short run and not visiting U.S. values on foreign societies.

After a year and a half or so, at the post, I took a look at the Foreign Service and at myself, my family, my situation, and in discussion with my wife, who was even less ambitious for high rank than I, decided that the real reason I had joined the Foreign Service was to see the world, to learn the languages of the world, to travel everywhere. I decided to opt always for assignments on different continents, with different languages and different types of work. I wanted to develop a dilettantism, or a polyvalence, to assure me that I would move around all over the globe, do all the kinds of work the Foreign Service had to offer and see the whole world. And that's what I tried to do. I made that a policy through my whole career, made some key decisions along the way that were for the purpose of seeing the world rather than moving up in the Foreign Service.

Q: I think one of the things that's often overlooked is there are ways one has far more control over in your career and where you go than often is thought, either it be the old Foreign Service or the new one, albeit it has it discipline. You were in Ankara from 1954-'57, then you went to Tangier from 1957 to 1962—a fairly long tour there. What were you doing in Tangier? Can you describe the ambiance of the place?

NEHER: Okay. In keeping with this idea of going someplace else, and doing something else, and knowing that economics was my weakest area, I put economics as my preferred work and Asia, Africa and Latin America, or something of that sort, as my preferred areas. As you recall, we had at that time a kind of wish list of where we might want to go, and we could either name a post, or an area, or whatever, but there was no bid list and we had no information on what posts were available, or when they might open. But I was assigned as Economic Officer in Tangier, which at that time was in the AF [African] Bureau. Now, of course, Morocco is in NEA [Near Eastern Bureau]. So I got there partly because I was trying to go from one kind of work to another, and one continent to another.

Q: Well, Tangier was a very special case in those days. Could you describe how it was at the time, and the situation there?

NEHER: Yes. I got there in September or October, 1957. Morocco had become independent the year before. It consisted of three major parts. One of them was the International Zone of Tangier administered by the western powers, if Russia is included as a western power. The others were the northern zone, which had been a Spanish Protectorate, and the southern zone, a French Protectorate. When I arrived, Morocco had a political unification, but it wasn't very effective, but had no economic integration. Each of the three areas had its own laws and regulations, each had its own currency area, and most of the effective decisions were made locally rather than in Rabat, the capital. I was there during the time of the economic integration of Tangier and of the northern, Spanish, zone, into the French zone. The Moroccan franc became the only national monetary unit; the Spanish peseta was withdrawn. But the free money market continued for some time in Tangier. And Tangier still had an aura of the old outlaw smuggler's haven—what was the movie that was made of the ship captain who had the...

Q: Captain's Paradise.

NEHER: Yes. It still had a little bit of that feeling. Europe was still having problems with currency, and with import permits, and all sorts of import restrictions, and Tangier became a smuggling point, primarily for cigarettes to Italy, but also a whole range of goods for Spain where corruption ruled commerce. The smugglers bought old PT boats from the United States, surplus PT boats, modified them for speed and ran to the beaches of Spain and Italy to unload their cigarettes, or transistor radios and other items in demand, then head back to Tangier.

One of the unusual duties that fell to me in Tangier was the signing of re-export permits. Under the international regime for the territory, the U.S., like other signatories of the statute of 1923, enjoyed extra-territorial rights. No citizen of the United states could be a defendant in any but the local U. S. court, and no U. S.-origin goods could be transshipped from Tangier without the approval of the U. S. government—mine. So I was the one who signed the re-export permits for U. S. goods, most of which were to be smuggled into

Europe. Whole boatloads of cigarettes, cameras, radios and household appliances were approved under a policy of denying permits only to dangerous or embargoed merchandise. But Tangier was already losing some of that outlaw atmosphere and illicit activity when I got there. With the economic integration, it was almost entirely gone by the time I finished my tour of duty. Morocco was in fact governing Tangier, and the vestiges of the old international administration were being tidied up, and handed over to the Sultan.

One of my disappointments there was that we built a brand new Consulate General building, one of those prize-winning models. I think it was designed by Edward Durrell Stone. It was a beautiful building, but we didn't need it. We had the old palace which was down in the Medina, the old city, a magnificent place with gardens, fountains and courtyards. At that time, with Morocco fully independent and the capital well established in Rabat, all the diplomatic functions had become concentrated there. We were a backwater with no important purposes, but the bureaucracy went ahead with the final design of that building, which had been proposed by Joseph Satterthwaite when he had been Minister there, and then went back to become Assistant Secretary. The Consul General didn't want to recommend abandonment of the project because he wasn't sure what Satterthwaite's reaction would be. So he resisted all my and others' entreaties and allowed the construction to get under way. State spent, I think, $750,000, which at that time was a fortune, to build a building that every day was less and less necessary. We couldn't get anybody to stop and listen and say, “You don't need the building.” Because the diplomatic staff had all gone to Rabat, embassy secretaries, attach#s, bag and baggage.

Tangier, for me, was a remarkable learning experience. Here I was at my second post filling in for an absent Consul General during a Chiefs of Mission conference an inspection and the move to the new building. Here in Tangier, I was the Acting Principal Officer, at my second post. That's also an indication of the declining importance of the post. Now, of course, we've closed the Consulate and I suppose we've disposed of the building.

Q: It's sort of our oldest post in the world, wasn't it?

NEHER: Yes, I believe it was the first piece of diplomatic property owned abroad by the United States Government.

Q: Was there much contact when you were there with the Moroccan authorities, or were you pretty well found yourself in a western enclave, being with westerners?

NEHER: Well, socially we were more involved with the European community, British, French and Spanish. There was very small American community there. I think there were about 40,000 Spanish living in Tangier, 10,000-12,000 French, several thousand Portuguese and as many as 100,000 Moroccans. And socially, if you were going to play bridge, you were not going to find very many Moroccan neighbors who were interested. Same with tennis, swimming and beaches. The Moroccans who had lived around the beaches are like the Floridians who live there: they never go to the beach. So you tend, in your social life, to have more contact with the Europeans. But the working contact eventually became almost entirely with Moroccans, the local authorities, the police. In all our consular affairs, for example, we dealt directly and only with Moroccans; for any building problems we had, any living problems of our people there, we dealt with Moroccans. And for political and economic reporting, we may have consulted with the Europeans who were best informed, far better than the Moroccans, but the main contacts became those with Moroccans.

Q: We have really a special relationship, sort of an odd special relationship, with Morocco really from the time of George Washington on. I mean even before that. I mean even the time of the Continental Congress really coming more from the friendliness of the Moroccans. Had you found this still the special relationship between the two countries there? Was this transmitted into your dealings with the Morocco authorities?

NEHER: I think it was more evident in Tangier than to my colleagues in Rabat and Casablanca. Remember this, the late '50s was a time when the newly independent countries were pretty radical. We represented just the opposite. We represented every

force that was opposed to change, and modernization, and to turmoil. We wanted status quo. We wanted to keep things the way they were. In Morocco, the forces of change were the radical forces of the labor unions, the universities, the leftist intelligentsia. And they were all hostile to us. Tangier was not at the political center, wasn't highly politicized, and relations with the United States were conditioned, assuaged, by the awareness of the long, rich historic ties between the two countries. For example, in Tangier...I tried this, and I suggested to other people to try it, to get in a taxi in Tangier and just say, “la mission”, And the driver would always take you to the American Consulate, nowhere else. There was only one mission, and that was the American. And here, where the French, Spanish and British had been in present in much greater numbers than we “la mission” was the American mission. That quality still existed when I was there. The building itself, with its antiquity, and with its location inside the medina, belonged to the city, was a part of it. But we lost that asset entirely when we moved into the new building up on a barren hillside where anyone who approached the building could be seen 200 yards away. It was like an enfilade. And here we had abandoned that beautiful, historic refuge in the medina where donkeys clopped right through the archway that separated the two main parts of the Consulate. Spanish senoritas sang while hanging clothes to dry on a line on a rooftop, the Muezzin was calling to prayer and the babbling fountain in the courtyard provided the accompaniment. We belonged to that. You could smell it, you could feel it. We were a part of it. But we lost it, all of it. We moved out.

Q: Let's move on then to your next assignment. You went to Saigon and worked with what could only be called interesting times. You were there from '62 to '64, which covers basically probably the most critical period of the time there. Could you explain how the assignment came? What you were doing?

NEHER: It came unexpectedly. The cable came and said, “You're assigned as Commercial Officer to the Embassy in Saigon by way of the Mid-Career course.” Did you go through that yourself?

Q: No, I never did.

NEHER: It was very much like the Senior Seminar but aimed at mid- career people. The quality of the speakers, and presentations, was exactly the same. They were the leading sociologists, and journalists, editors, politicians, Ambassadors from foreign countries, academicians and politicians. The format was very much the same. They'd come and they'd talk for a couple of hours in the morning, and then we'd take them out to lunch, with an ad-hoc committee as the host, allowing us to continue the conversation. It was very nicely done, three or four months, as I recall. But the Saigon assignment came because I had had, in Tangier, really very little to do. Then, when a Department of Commerce trade mission came through I had a perfect program for them. I had it laid on just right. I had the lists of all the people who would be in the group discussion with them, and I had the recommended languages to speak. The reason for this excellence was that I had plenty of time and very little to do. I could give it all the energy and time it needed.

Q: This is one of the little tricks of the trade. Talk to the person who has time and can really set things up, and give a much greater and better impression than somebody who is so busy they can't spend the time.

NEHER: And unfortunately for me, I made such a good impression that the Department of Commerce grabbed onto me and wouldn't let me go. So they got me for Commercial Officer in Saigon. You can imagine what commercial affairs were like in Saigon at the time, when the Diem government was falling, there were coups and demonstrations, Buddhist monks self- immolating, changes of Ambassadors, the CIA everywhere, terrorism attacks. It wasn't the right place to be. It may have been the right place to be, but it was the wrong job.

Q: What did you think about going there? I mean to Saigon at the time, '62?

NEHER: I welcomed it because my purpose, again, was to see the world. And if you've been in Turkey your first assignment doing consular affairs, and then you go to Morocco and do economic affairs—and in the second two years in Morocco I did economic and political Affairs—then you're going to go to the Far East and do commercial affairs, not bad. I didn't care much for commercial affairs, but it was the Far East so I welcomed it because it would allow me to see more of the world.

Q: What was your view of the situation in Saigon? This is '62, before you went. What did you think about it. What were you getting from your colleagues?

NEHER: Well, you know everybody now is saying, “I was always opposed to the U.S...,” but, in fact, I was. I was very much opposed to the U.S. approach to Vietnam, to the current assessment of the U. S. interest there, and the kind of investment we should put in to protect that interest. I thought it should be proportionate. I argued as much as I could against direct and open involvement in Vietnam. The last dinner...I guess it was when Bill Trueheart was leaving, we had a dinner at the home of head the head Economic Section, and I remember arguing vociferously there that we really didn't understand the problem, that the Vietnamese understood it better than we, that we didn't have an important stake in the country. One of the reasons probably...well, I'm not sure it's a reason, whether it was a cause, or an effect, but because I was fluent in French, having majored in French as an undergraduate, I had the literary background as well as the conversational, I had a number of friends in the French community that I think other people in our Embassy didn't have. Some of them were cooperants, somewhat like our Peace Corps volunteers. They were people who were serving as teachers, social workers, and so forth as an alternative to military service. I saw many of them, and both their immersion in Vietnamese life and their consciousness of the French military failure, convinced them that our efforts were destined to fail. Some of that certainly rubbed off on me. But rationally I really could not see an outcome to that involvement that would satisfy the American government, American planners, the military, the political leaders at home, and the American people. Because

there was no clear agreement, as far as I could see at the time, on what the goals were. If it was democracy and freedom of choice in Vietnam, what were we doing with Nhu and Diem? I mean his family didn't have any commitment to democracy at all. And if it was stopping monolithic communism, well, it was not monolithic at that time. China and the Soviets were very much at odds.

We had one young officer there in the Embassy, Bill Beachner, whose job was reporting on north-south relations. And nobody wanted to read what he was writing, but it was good stuff. He was not an imposing person. I think he didn't have the family and education, an elitist kind of background that most of the other young officers had. Most of them were Ivy Leaguers from all the right families, and so he was not one of the “in” people. But he kept looking at the tensions between North Vietnam and China, for example, and the traditional animosity that continued to exist. Nobody wanted to hear that. I mean, you had to talk about communism, and you had to lump together China and the Soviet Union, and North Vietnam, and not look for nuances at all. Not look for tensions or changes. And once you had the military there, all those not aligned with the government of Vietnam became simply “Charlies,” short for Viet Cong.

Q: How did you find the atmosphere in the Embassy as far as the relationship between the officers? We have a large Political Section and were they pretty much unanimous, on how they felt on the situation?

NEHER: The new officers coming in, the young ones coming in, who had been trained in the language, and who were going to go out and work in or with the provinces—although we didn't have any CORDS at the time, or any U.S. structure in the countryside, were reporting back to Saigon that there were problems. They were not happy with military assessments of one kind and another, with the statements that supported our effort and were uncritical. They were quite critical, but the top levels in Saigon had to reflect the policy emanating from the White House. And that policy, elaborated by the White House, the Pentagon and the CIA, and by very hard liners at the top in the State Department, and

supported by strong Congressional interest, was very hard line. It's a little like the people now who are shouting about Noriega.

Q: You're thinking about the dictator in Panama.

NEHER: That's right. You have one enemy, let's get rid of him. You can't even ask at this time, suppose we had put our forces in there, and they had met the full Panamanian army, and you had a war. You can't even ask it. You have to give Jesse Helms honor and respect even though he's completely nuts on this issue.

Q: This is the Senator from North Carolina who is extreme right—who is continuing mini crises with Panama should we intervene and oust this dictator or not?

NEHER: At any rate, at that time there was no way to find an audience for the observations that Beachner was writing. Nobody wanted to sit down and do thoughtful analysis, looking at the forces in play and then recommend where to put our efforts and our resources in order to improve our prospects. We were going to solve the problem. We were prepared to force a solution on Vietnam. We were going to solve the problem by calling in the military. But with the military, who have to distinguish between friend and foe, all nuances would be lost. It would now be us and them. And that was an oversimplification that would not allow for thoughtful analysis and indicate diplomatic means to deal with the problem.

Q: Did you have any contact with the American military at the mid-level or something? What were they thinking about?

NEHER: Not very much. I did have one colonel—colonel or lieutenant colonel, I think he was a full colonel—who was a little like John Vann. I didn't know Vann, but my colonel was a little like that. He was out in the boonies all the time, had candy in his pockets for the kids, and he knew them by name in some of the villages. Did you read Vann's...

Q: Yes. A book called A Bright and Shining Lie.

NEHER: A Bright and Shining Lie, John Vann. This colonel's attitude was very much like Vann's was at the outset. He saw the complexity of the problems, the ambivalence of our goals, and was skeptical about the ability of a military force to accomplish very much. At that time we had no combat troops in Vietnam. We had 17,500 advisors who helped with planning , training and who accompanied Vietnamese troops into the field. Another military contact was my own brother-in-law, well, the brother of my brother-in-law. He came out as a young Captain, as an advisor on his first tour, while I was there. He came back later on at least once occasion as a commander of a unit there, and finished his career as a full colonel. When he was in Saigon he stayed with me, so we had a lot of good talk about the military operations. He, too, was skeptical about the effectiveness of the military's role in the conflict.

Q: Just trying to get a little of the atmosphere. Say the younger officers trained in Vietnamese affairs, were sitting around saying "Sam has to go," or something like this. Or were they saying, If Diem goes, what happens after this?" obviously speaking before November 1963.

NEHER: The loudest voices were those echoing the official policy of the U.S., taking a hard line in support of more vigorous U.S. involvement. Henry Cabot Lodge came to replace Frederick Nolting just before the coup against Diem, in the summer of 1963, and he came with a mandate from President Kennedy to do something, or so it seemed to me. You know, get the show on the road. Tell me what you need. At that point the people who moved to the top and were closest to the Ambassador's ear, were those who were saying, "Yeah, damn right, right on, let's go." I remember hearing at one of Lodge's first staff meetings an embassy officer saying, "Give us 50,000 Green Berets, and we'll clean up this mess." And those who said such things got the applause. Not literally applause, of course, but that was the "right" thing to say.

Q: That was the Kennedy thrust. Special forces were the answer to really everything.

NEHER: And another expression that I heard there that I'll never forget, was when we were talking about dependents, whether they should stay or be evacuated. One of our embassy officers in the meeting said they should go. “We've got to clear the decks for action.” That, it seemed to me, was what the U.S. leaders, both at home and in the embassy, wanted to hear. What they didn't seem, to want to hear was, “Yeah, but....” The speaker might not be invited to the next meeting. I was duty officer one Saturday when the Embassy was preparing its hottest, most comprehensive report, the weekly status report when we got a cable, probably flash or niact, to change the title of the report from that to the weekly progress report. I often joke that that was the turning point in the war.

Q: This gives the...

NEHER: The wave was rolling and it was going to go its course and I don't think these young officers who may have had doubts about the wisdom of that policy, or the possible success of it, were heard very much. And they didn't have much success in getting their doubts conveyed to decision makers.

Q: What about the CIA? Again, this as an unclassified interview. Did you find that the CIA had any particular influence in the discipline, in the atmosphere of the place that you were aware of from your own perspective?

NEHER: I knew a number of the CIA people very well, and went to parties with them where I was sometimes one of the very few non-CIA people at the parties. They were gung-ho because they were having the time of their lives. They had resources, they had everything they wanted; they had access to Ngo Dinh Diem and, especially, to his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, and to the family. They didn't need the Embassy. They were doing a lot of things that nobody really needed to know about, and they were really having a ball. They were pilots doing air drops and rescues of one kind and another in Vietnam and the

neighboring countries; they were under covers as varied as film and drama producers and industrial salesmen; they were trainers, weapons experts, merchants. Theirs was entirely an operational role, not an analytical one, as far as I knew. They had people on the payroll, agents they were running. They had unbelievable funds. Only one of them, whom I knew quite well, was given to much doubt about the wisdom of the involvement. The others were not thinking about doubt so much. I think maybe at higher levels they were, but at the lower levels they were in a full court press. That was not a time to be thinking about anything except the game. That's what they thought about.

Q: How about...did you have much contact with the Vietnamese at the time—government or otherwise?

NEHER: Not so much with government, but socially very good contact with Vietnamese. That is, professional people, lawyers, doctors, scientists. I had very good contact with them.

Q: What was your impression? Did you feel that we were sustaining an elite, or did you feel this was a group dedicated to building a nation, or how did you feel about that?

NEHER: I'm not sure I remember how I felt. I'm certain I must have had pretty clear feelings about it, but looking back on the individuals that I knew, I generally liked them as individuals, they were very meritorious people. I respected and admired Vietnamese on the professional and social levels. I think that was the feeling I'm searching for, not so much, can these people maintain an independent country? are they the ones for whom the government should take action? is this where the future of the country lies? I don't know. I really don't remember what I thought about it to be perfectly candid.

Q: I was in Saigon five years later, and I don't think it really was a relief. There they were and this is a nice people with whom we were dealing.

Let's come to how did you see the events—it was November of '63 wasn't it? Again from your perspective.

NEHER: November was the assassination of Kennedy.

Q: I mean October of '63. How did you see this at the time, I mean the situation just prior to it within the Embassy, and afterwards.

NEHER: Well, having very early in my tour of duty there I thought that we really didn't know what we were doing in the country, and that we were in fact replacing Vietnamese judgments, analysis, thinking and programs with our own. We wanted Vietnamese officials who would be cooperative with us, officials who would say “yes” instead of “no”. It was my understanding that the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem signaled that an impatient U.S. was going to push recalcitrant Vietnamese out of the way and get in and do the job by itself. It was my impression that we'd just lost control of it entirely. Now, of course, we still didn't have military forces in the country, and the debate was raging at the time as to whether we should and, if so, how many, what types, how soon, and where. Big Minh had been in power only a short time before he was overthrown by Nguyen Khan, and not long after that Cao and Ky came on the scene. I had certainly not been unhappy to see Diem and his very authoritarian family, including his brothers and Madame Nhu, to leave the scene. I wasn't happy to see that they had been killed in a coup that was, if not sponsored by us, at least condoned by us—I mean, encouraged. I think it was inevitable they were to go. But I had seen enough of Vietnam by this time and decided that I would leave at the first opportunity.

Q: Just one thing. How about the American community? I assume there was an American Chamber of Commerce?

NEHER: No.

Q: Because when I was there five years later there was a very active American Chamber of Commerce. So American commercial interests were sort of minor?

NEHER: Yes. They were, or they were being handled at a level other than mine. For example, some of the key people, the representative of PanAm, had direct access to the Ambassador. And the big trading companies, those people knew the Ambassador and they didn't even pass through the Commercial Section in the Embassy. If they had a problem they discussed it directly with the Ambassador, and very often if there was any kind of political intervention necessary, or pressure to bring on somebody, or an interest to defend, very often it was defended elsewhere in the embassy or the huge aid mission, and I didn't even hear about it.

Q: One of the things, at least during the time was, that there were all sorts of reasons put forward why we were in Vietnam in all of this. We kept changing our stance. But from the far left, a sort of democracy interpretation, at least at one time it was, that we were in there because—I think it was tungsten—Vietnam as a source of important material, or something. So I'd like to ask you as a Commercial Officer in the Economic Section, did we have much of a strategic or economic interest in Vietnam?

NEHER: None that I could see at all. We had very little activity there. Most of the activity had to do with the importation of goods paid for with American aid—materials of one kind or another, supplies, food, and so forth. There was a lot of big business being done, but most of it was under our own commercial import program run by AID.

Q: That was so, I mean we were paying for imports so as a practical measure, our interest in the area, your rather important viewpoint had nothing to do with the economics of the place.

NEHER: I would dismiss out of hand any thought that even a small part of our motivation for being there had to do with protection of commercial, or financial, or industrial interests.

It did not at all. I remember one amusing event there. I got a visit of somebody from one of the clothing manufacturers in the United States. He'd come to the Commercial Section because his company, the manufacturer of Arrow shirts, was thinking of filing a suit against a local Chinese shirt manufacturer. The Chinese manufacturer was producing a similar dress shirt, and I went out and bought one as part of my little investigation. The name was ALLOW and running through the logo was an arrow. The Arrow shirt representative said “This Chinese is selling Allow shirts. So when you go into a place and you ask for an Allow shirt, that's what you get. You get his instead of ours.” I advised him to forget the case. How was an attorney going to enunciate and differentiate “allow” and “arrow” in a courtroom where nobody could tell the difference.

Q: Then you moved, in early '64 you moved to Damascus, which does show actually a rather remarkable career because normally they would have hauled you back kicking and screaming to Washington by this time. But you were moving from...Saigon was a difficult place, and certainly Damascus at the time was. What were you doing there? What was your work in Damascus?

NEHER: I was assigned as Commercial Officer. I protested, because the Department of Commerce had promised me when I had objected to being assigned as Commercial Officer—it wasn't my favorite field, I didn't want to stay in it—that they would not hold me to another commercial assignment if I accepted the one in Saigon. But they wouldn't let me go. State Department wanted me for other things, but they insisted at that time that I would have to take the commercial assignment. Well, I wanted to get out of Vietnam, and here was a chance to go to a part of the world I hadn't seen. And learn a language that I didn't speak. Well, actually I had learned some conversational Arabic in Tangier. But this was going to be a different kind of Arabic, and it was a place I had wanted to see—the Middle East, the Holy Land. I hadn't been down there—the old castles and fortresses, the Roman and Greek ruins. My family was very much interested in that, so we packed up and went

to Damascus at a very inconvenient time in the school year. But I did want to get out of Vietnam.

Q: What was the situation in Damascus at that time? We're talking about 1964.

NEHER: The Baath party, the radical Arab “renaissance” party, had been in power. It was maintaining the same confrontational attitude toward Israel, and its supporters, that it has ever since. It was uncompromising. And we were the second worst enemy in the world as the supporters, the defenders of Israel. Relations were very strained. and got worse during the two years that I was there, a run-up to the '67 war. In one notorious case, a covert operation by the CIA had gone wrong and one of the local agents, who had been under a businessman's cover, was dragged before a military court to repeat his confessions before television cameras. Day after day he confessed, each day in weaker condition, clearly beaten almost to death. It was obvious that he was barely able to hang together, and then when the confession was complete, the authorities hanged him in the public square. During that time the radio and press were pounding the anti-American drums, denouncing the United States, and the Embassy, naming names of embassy personnel involved, and describing how the CIA agents had tried to seduce a Syrian naval officer. The officer had, it seems, met an agent at the Ambassador's residence during an official reception there.

Q: Who was the Ambassador?

NEHER: Ridgway Knight. You can imagine what that did for our already sour relations. And that was under a relatively moderate Baathi government in Damascus. Then came a radical coup, bringing in another wave of unskilled military people to govern. Some of the most radical moved in with real revolutionary zeal. They constituted themselves into a type of Red Guard. They evicted bank personnel and put the banks in the hands of young military people who knew nothing about banking. There was chaos in the economy and the political life. Businesses were nationalized. The newcomers were radical, leftist, disorganized. And more than ever we were the enemy. So it was very difficult to...

Q: I can't think of any reason for a Commercial Officer there.

NEHER: There was a post. There was a position. And I wanted to be in the Middle East.

Q: Let's talk about other things, but from a strictly commercial point of view, what commercial interest could we possibly have had?

NEHER: That's what I had to try to define for the Ambassador. The Ambassador wanted action. I was a staff member of his and he wanted action. But there wasn't anything that I could give him. I was not at all interested in promoting U.S. investments because the history of U.S. investment had been characterized by total loss for the United States. Mostly. There wasn't a lot of trade that could be developed. So I concentrated trying to promote licensing arrangements, where Syrian money, rather than U.S. money would be at risk, and licensing profits would go back to the U.S. Needless to say, it didn't work out very well. But I also was handling labor affairs. And labor in Syria was very political. The Baath party was using the labor unions as one of its militant arms. This was the Red Guard that moved into banks and other enterprises. So handling labor was my most interesting task. I had two very interesting Ministers of Labor during my tour of duty. One of them was very colorful. He was the most radical of all, and was sort of a wild man. He was executed eventually by the Syrian government. I think he murdered the husband of his girlfriend, or something of that sort. It was a peculiar story, but he was a big guy, and had a great big flowing moustache, and he spoke in a voice that rocked the room. I remember the first time when I called on him. He had assembled the press and television. When I came into his office he asked me to sit down. Then, with cameras rolling, he launched into a virulent anti-imperialist—i.e., anti American— speech. Well, I sat there not knowing whether to remain or to walk out. Finally I said some absolutely innocuous words to the media. And then, when he had finished he sent everybody away and came over and embraced me, and said, “Have some coffee.” And this was the kind of relationship we had during the short time he remained as Minister. It was a surprisingly productive relationship. Fearless, even of this representative of imperialism, he talked freely, responded to my

questions and proved to be very helpful. In fact, on one occasion he agreed that Syria would support one of our candidates as head of the ILO instead of the Polish candidate put forth by the Soviet Union. It was a typical East-West conflict and came at a time when Syria was most closely aligned with the USSR. Imagine the futility of trying to convince the Syrian government to support a Western candidate against one from the East bloc. But that's what the instructions to the Embassy were and we had to try. Well, he agreed over coffee in his office to do just that. It didn't come off, of course, and he must have gotten an earful from less naive members of the ruling clique, but it gave me an interesting moment and something to report to Washington that must have looked surprising in writing. We continued to have that kind of a relationship throughout the short term of his ministry. He sent me a card that I have lost and I wish I had back again. It was a greeting card on the occasion of May Day, the last May Day I was there. On the front was a cartoon showing Uncle Sam with his red, white and blue top hat with his head being cut off. The caption was “Death to imperialists.” And inside he had written “With friendliest greetings.” Crazy. I wish I still had that card, but like so many things that disappear in the constant packing and unpacking of an FSO, it got lost. Too bad. It would make an amusing addition to my souvenir collection.

Q: What was the Embassy...here you were in this situation, did you feel you were marking time, or was Ambassador Knight trying to do something about relations, or was it sort of almost felt it was a lost cause and you were just holding on?

NEHER: As far as the commercial work was concerned, that was marking time. But the Ambassador treated me very well, and on the very first trip he made out of town, he chose me to go with him. He was interested in the situation in Vietnam and at staff meetings he would draw me into discussions of it for the benefit of the other members of the team. And then I got more and more into the economic side from the commercial side, and did some general economic reporting. I tried to get the Embassy to take an initiative to kill the AID program for Syria.

Q: Did we have an AID program?

NEHER: We still had remnants. Most or all of the money was the local currency counterpart of PL 480 funds. The AID mission was proposing to use it to build grain silos, but none of the money could be released until Syria paid its overdue debt to the U.S. I remember writing a very provocative memorandum to the Ambassador in which I pointed out how Syria used its resources against the interests of the United States, and therefore we should put maximum pressure on the government to repay the loan, then cancel the aid program in its entirety. I proposed that if we could not cancel the program we should put the money into the Hejaz railway which the Syrians wanted to build to connect Damascus with Medina or Jeddah or someplace in the Muslim holy land. I said that since that was a complete rat hole, and nothing profitable could ever come of it, we should put it into something that would be a constant drain on the treasury of Syria. I wrote this, tongue in cheek, but used a logic the Ambassador appreciated. He sent it to the head of the Economic Section who was my boss, a very sober officer. He said, “You can't be serious about this.” And I said, “I'm very serious about it.” Anyway, we did finally end the aid program, whether for the payment problem or another, I don't recall.

Q: What was the attitude? Here is an Embassy in a very hostile environment and at the same time you're looking at Israel. The Foreign Service has been considered to be more pro-Arab than pro-Israel. Did you find any of this? Or what was the attitude towards Israel from the people around, and your own attitude towards our policy? We're talking about the '66-'68 period.

NEHER: It's no secret that the Foreign Service, particularly people who specialize in Middle Eastern affairs, tend to be unbalanced in favor of the Arabs against Israel. I found that in the Embassy at the working level. I don't think I detected that in the top levels at the Embassy, either Ambassador Knight, who was there when I arrived in 1964, or his Deputy Chief of Mission, Bob Moore. They were very balanced, very wise, very good people. A political appointee followed Knight and he too was, I thought, very balanced—Hugh

Smythe. But at the working levels, some of my colleagues were rabid anti-Israelis. That always bothered me, and we argued about it, but it seemed to me then and still does that most of these attitudes were formed long ago in family backgrounds and pre-government experience.

Q: Well, looking at it, how did you see U.S. interests in the area at the time?

NEHER: Well, Syria was hopeless as far as the United States was concerned. Its ties were with the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, East Germany. It wasn't interested in us. We weren't interested in Syria except to try to do whatever we could to encourage moderation and allow us to continue observing the frontier. We had to be there for those purposes and I think that my role in Syria was mostly that of observer. I had good contacts with Syrians, despite the policy differences between the two countries. I also contributed to the education of a new ambassador and his DCM, neither of whom had ever been in the Middle East before. We had a DCM come in as a Charge in an interval between our Ambassadors. He really needed an education. We started in the very first staff meeting —some of us questioned some of the assumptions behind his guidance to us, especially that U.S. policy toward the Arabs and Israel was an even-handed one. We disagreed so strongly that he invited several of us to meet with him and discuss this at length. That gave us the opportunity to give our points of view and describe the very different relations the United States had with Syria and other Arab states on the one hand and Israel on the other.At any rate, when I look back on my time there, I go clear back to that decision I made in Turkey about seeing the world, and when somebody asks me about Damascus I think of Palmyra, and I think of the Krak des Chevaliers, of Jerusalem, and the ruins of Jerash, of traveling down to the Gulf of Aqaba, of seeing a new and fascinating part of the world. And I come back again to my original plan for my career in the Foreign Service.

Q: To finish up with Syria. How did you, and the Embassy, view the "communist menace" there? Did you see this being as a place that was being taken over by the Soviets, or did you see local communism of the Syrians used maybe for nationalistic purposes?

NEHER: I think the latter. I think we saw the Syrians as highly nationalistic, ambitious, particularly in relations with other Arabs and with their eyes on Lebanon. We assumed that the Syrians wanted greater influence in Lebanon, didn't like the Lebanese government, didn't like the westernization, because the Syrians are the people from the other side of the mountains. They're on the desert side. What they saw was the Sodom and Gomorrah of Beirut, with its casinos, its luxuries, its western orientation. We saw that as something that held the Syrians' attention, but we didn't see the Syrians as interested in communism as a form of government. They wanted their ties with the Soviets, as a source of military assistance and economic support. They also found a great deal of solidarity on the international front. They liked that. It was very valuable for them. It allowed them to be confrontational with Israel and resistant to us. It also allowed them to be truculent in their dealings with other Arab countries.

For example, during my time in Syria, the country did not have diplomatic relations with Morocco, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon or Egypt. So we saw Syria as a radical Arab state that was trying to hold itself together, to govern itself, and to ride on the slogan of Arab unity, the Arab nation. The relation with the communist countries were arrangements of convenience, for ways of getting ...

Q: So we didn't see this communism being the wave of the future?

NEHER: Not at all, not at all.

Q: I must say the Middle Eastern world does seem to have its own inoculation against communism, it's its own world, and it's not going to be influenced by us, or by others.

NEHER: That's right.

Q: Were you there during the...was it the '67 war?

NEHER: No, we left in '66. But we were there during a Baathi coup. An interesting little event there. When we'd gone through the coup in Saigon it was pretty noisy and our house was right downtown, not too far from the presidential barracks, and we had the artillery shells going over, and mortars, all through the night, crashing nearby. And only the next morning when the noise of the coup was tapering off did I realize that the electricity hadn't gone off, and I had a tape recorder there, and I could have taped a coup. I told my family how disgusted I was that I didn't think about taping the coup. I said, “Next time.” So there we were in February of '66, in Damascus, and about 6:30 in the morning my two little boys —about eight and nine years old—came crashing into the bedroom saying, “Daddy, there's a coup. Get out your tape recorder.” Boy, I thought, how blas# these Foreign Service kids can be. First thing to think about in a coup, is to get the tape recorder out. So I taped it, and I have a very good Syrian coup on tape. A noisy one, airplanes, tanks, and guns, and some patrol action right in front of my house.

Q: I don't know how much we should deal with your time in the Department of State, and the Department of Defense. This is from '66 to '70. What were your major jobs?

NEHER: The first two years you can pass over. It's the only time in my Foreign Service career that I worked 9:00 to 5:00, or 8:30 to 5:00 or whatever it was. I never had that kind of job before, or since. But that one was in munitions control, and I was what is called an Arms Policy Officer. It was really a job that had to be done. It had to be done by a FSO, but it was without challenges or interest.

Q: Well then, let's move on.

NEHER: I went to the Pentagon on the exchange program for two years after that, and that was interesting because I found myself with a real job, a hard job. But not being one of the military or in competition with military or civilians in the Defense Department, I found that I could free-wheel there. I was interested in seeing how much decision-making latitude, and

how much influence could come to a person who was willing to accept it, and I wanted to accept it. I found it went a long way.

Q: What were you doing?

NEHER: I was in Foreign Military Rights Affairs in the Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, International Security Affairs. And there we dealt with the problems of military operations around the world: bases, base rights, operational needs involving foreign countries, issues of that sort. I was very much involved for the latter part of my two years there in two projects. One was the Turkish base negotiations, and second was establishment of the base on the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. I found it interesting because it gave me an opportunity to see the way the military services compete with each other, cooperate, deal with the civilians throughout the structure and draw on ties with Congress to get what they want. I also witnessed how the military decide what to tell the president and what not to tell him about their plans and programs. It's a very selective procedure. If your real intentions are “X”, you realize that if you say that, you're not going to get what you want, so you have to back off, and come up with “W” maybe, or with “V”, or with “U”, or “T”. You've got to step back a little bit and go after this or that, and Diego Garcia was a case in point. What the Navy really wanted there, they were reluctant to tell the President, or the Congress.

Q: What do they want? NEHER: They wanted a strategic base, in effect. They wanted to be able to put Polaris subs in there. But they couldn't say that because that would mean an important development and could even effect Soviet defense posture. So they had to say that they wanted to dredge the harbor to a certain number of feet in order to make a turning basin for certain large ships. That's isn't what they wanted. It had to be that many feet for Polaris subs. And the Air Force kept proposing extra length to the air strip to accommodate even the C-5. Is that too sensitive for this report?

Q: You can knock some of these things out.

NEHER: No, I don't think I'll knock that out. It's old stuff. But at any rate, the problem there that I found interesting was, how to get the military, and the things that I was working on, how to get them communicated to the decision-making levels at the top. I mean that kind of decision, shouldn't that go to the National Security Council? Shouldn't you have a review of that somewhere? And part of my job, as I saw it, was to find out how to move it up to a level where you could get somebody to see what the implications were, and make a policy decision on it, rather than watch the military go ahead and just nibble away a bit at a time until they got the whole piece of cake. My office was fairly successful in doing that.

On the Turkish base negotiations, there my recommendations were proven right, but more by luck more than intelligence. The negotiations were for the most part done, and the military had achieved about what it wanted. But we were involved in lots of legalistic bargaining and there seemed to be a chance that these details would block the completion of the negotiations. And there I became an active participant, reiterating that the entire treaty was more than the sum of its parts. And that we ought to be more flexible on some of the points because it was the having of the treaty, the existence of the treaty, that was most important. We overcame a number of objections that way. I convinced the Air Force counsel, who represented the service most affected by the agreement to adopt that approach. Along with many others, including a the State Department negotiators, the agreement was successfully concluded. Of course, as it turned out, the agreement wasn't implemented in that form at that time because of other important differences between the United States and Turkey.

Q: Well, tell me. Something, as I do these interviews from my own experience, I'm always surprised—maybe that's not the word—but I find it interesting the difference between what I would say the military approach to things, and the Foreign Service approach to things. It's hard to transmit to military men, I have found anyway, the complexity of relations. The military seem to see things as an objective and they don't take into account the

sensitivities of other nations, and the fact that they may be sovereign themselves. Did you find this was a problem?

NEHER: I did very much. But part of it is institutional. Working over there at the Joint Chiefs, let's say, is a young Lieutenant Commander, and his assignment is to list, in priority, the places where the Navy would like to do hydrographic research, for strategic or tactical purposes—military purposes. He goes out and the first thing you get are the Kamchatka Peninsula, on Lake Aral, and so forth. You take one look at his list and say, “You're nuts. You can't do hydrographic research in there.” And he says, “That's not my job. My job is to set the priorities. I don't have a political judgment.” So from the bottom up you get the company commander who says, “I need three more men, or I need more shelves, I need more this or that.” This may be the worst thing you can do, get on the slippery slope. Or, “I realize I'm only an advisor to these foreign troops, but I need to defend myself. Can I fire in self defense?” Then, “Instead of just being able to fire back at somebody who fires at me, if I think he's going to fire at me, I have to be able to fire first.” So you've got to say, “Okay, you can fire first.” And then, “If you just let me fire first, and I have to wait until I see this guy who is going to fire at me, I'm likely to come in second. I've got to go out and find him.” You say, “Okay, all right, you go out and find him, and you fire first.” From a policy side, these things may be all wrong, but from his narrow, specific operational point of view, it 's the way he has to act, the way he's expected to act. But when these proposals come up from the bottom, without a political filtration of any kind, some may get through. And if you find the proposals vacuous, even dangerous, the military officer will say, “Policy's not my job. That's your job.” We in the Foreign Service are a different breed. We think policy from the day we take on the uniform, but neither the military officer making the original proposal nor his superiors wants to leaven them with policy considerations.

Did you find this in informal conversations when they were not presenting their side? I've often found the sensitivities, or political complexities, didn't seem to even enter the informal type of talk. Have you noticed this?

NEHER: Yes, among some of them, yes. I ran across some very wise, very balanced officers, people who actually did take these things into consideration, and others who were gung-ho at all levels. You know, “Damn the torpedoes, and damn the political consequences, and damn the sensitivities. We've got a job to do, and we're going to get in there and do it. Take the wraps off us.” I was at the Pentagon from 1968 to '70, and this was a time when there was really beginning to be doubt about Vietnam, and what we were doing there. There was doubt at the highest levels. Secretaries of Defense and many of the people around them were beginning to doubt. I was at that time in the Pentagon but working closely with State Department, and I found much more of that doubt and questioning about Vietnam in the Pentagon than I did in the State Department. State was much more gung-ho about it, “Don't get in our way. We've got to get this thing solved.” I think I found more people at the Pentagon, even among the military who were willing to speak up about their doubts, including veterans of combat there, than I did here in the State Department.

There was an aura in the State Department. Again, it was like the one in the Embassy in Saigon. You've got to get with the program. You're not supposed to make these decisions. We're out there to do this job.

Q: So again we're talking about the Foreign Service minds. We were talking about the military minds, so the Foreign Service at a certain point begins to jell, this is the way we should do things.

NEHER: Leadership in the State Department, you know, didn't waiver, under Rusk, and at the White House. The civilian leadership didn't waiver very much even towards the last. But the military leadership did. These were civilian leaders at the Pentagon, and also

Generals, and down through the ranks they began to say, “Wait a minute. This isn't going to work.” That was not true, of course, for Westmoreland and the people around him.

Q: We move then from the Department of Defense to your next assignment which was from 1970 to '72 as Principal Officer in Lubumbashi in Zaire. What was your main job there?

NEHER: A presence. Lubumbashi, capital of old Katanga.

Q: This was the old...

NEHER: Elisabethville, and this was Katanga province, the Shaba province, and with the one tribal group down there that had given the country its most serious problems—the Lunda. Moise Tshombe's family had come from there. These are the people who had the closest relationship with the so-called Katanga Gendarmes who had gone over to Angola and operated from there, and were always a threat to Katanga, which became Shaba province. There was, in effect, a mini mission there in Lubumbashi. We had an AID program, a military assistance program, the Peace Corps, and they all had representatives there. We were a thousand miles by air from the nearest Ambassador, and he expected me to be in charge.

Q: The Ambassador was?

NEHER: Sheldon Vance. He wanted me to take charge but wanted to be sure that he knew what was happening. He wanted me to be fully informed and to be the head of the American community in the province. It was a busy job, and an interesting one because of that character as a mini mission. I had to make decisions there on program content, to do the political reporting, to establish productive relations with the authorities and the foreign community and to be responsible for the behavior of official Americans. I had to do all those things.

Q: What were American interests in that area?

NEHER: The political interest stemmed from the legacy of the Katanga independence movement from 1960 to 1963. The United States had played an active role in ending the secession and in bringing Katanga province back into newly independent Zaire. So we needed to follow political developments related to that period. We also needed to keep Washington informed of the quality of governance, of dissidence among tribal groupings, especially the Lunda. And there was always the presence of the so-called Katanga Gendarmes in Angola, a sleeping menace to Zaire's integrity. We had to keep reminding an over-sensitive Embassy in Kinshasa that the secession tendencies were overstated. Kinshasa kept noting little things that it interpreted as signs of renewed interest in secession. We were constantly having to deal with the Embassy's exaggerated reactions to the smallest hints of revival of the secessionist feelings in Katanga. To do that, we had to have good political feelers throughout the Zairian and foreign communities and had to keep the wires humming with information about what was really happening, or, more likely, what was not happening. Because we were all new in a new country, we had to do heavy biographic reporting. We needed to identify the governors, military personnel, businessmen and others who might become important in years to come. Those were the main political responsibilities.

We also had economic interests in the area. Katanga province, later called Shaba, sits atop one of the richest mineral deposits in the world. There were U.S. interests in copper. A consortium led by Americans had come in and got a big concession in the province and wanted to establish a mining operation very fast, on an accelerated scale. There were a lot of visitors coming in. Maurice Tempelsman was one of the principals, acting for himself and, probably, for President Mobutu in putting the consortium together. There were Japanese, French and British interests involved in addition to the American ones.

We had an AID program that Mobutu wanted very badly: patrol boats on Lake Tanganyika to control what he described as rebel activities up along the lake. Some of those areas

were inaccessible by land but could be reached by water. That project was in my consular district, so I was responsible for establishing relations with local authorities, and hosting and briefing people who came through Lubumbashi in connection with that project. That also meant travel to the port city, Kalemie, from time to time.

All in all, Lubumbashi was a miniature diplomatic mission and I enjoyed being head of it. None of us doubted the need for the post to be there. But now, of course, the consulate is closed and in the changed situation it apparently isn't yet needed.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Zairians, the government and the people in that particular far off province?

NEHER: Very difficult. There was a lack of discipline, very often in the administrative structure of the country. There was a lot of free-wheeling by authorities, military, police, governmental authorities, and some of it pretty scary.

Q: How do you mean, scary?

NEHER: For example, one time the local commander of the military base in Lubumbashi decided that he would have his men go around and confiscate stolen vehicles. He wanted it to be a secret operation so he told his men they couldn't be in uniform, couldn't carry any identification, couldn't explain who they were when asked. But they were to confiscate all stolen cars. Most of these soldiers were illiterate. They hadn't any way of looking at pieces of paper and deciding which were stolen cars. Well, one of the cars they picked up belonged to Gerard, one of the local employees of the Consulate. They hot-wired the car while he and his friends gathered around and objected, but the soldiers would not identify themselves and would not tell where the car was being taken. There was a big fight and that consular assistant got beaten. He was thrown into the car that had brought these people to the scene, and taken away. I got a call at home immediately saying that Gerard had been beaten and taken, probably, to the military base, but no one knew for sure. There was a history of abuse by military and civilian authorities, very serious abuse of

people who were picked up and held. So I asked one of the young men who had reported this to me—one of Gerard's friends—if he would come with me to the base. I would call on the commander of the base and see if we could get our man released. He was very reluctant to do it, but he did get in the car, and we went to the base. I didn't have a driver on duty so I was driving myself. This was on a weekend. I drove to the gate and identified myself at the gate. The guard was a non-com who had no authority to let me in, but I was determined to get on the base. I had this friend of Gerard's sitting on the seat beside me, and while we were talking to the guard to get onto the base, the car that had been used by the men who had arrested Gerard was coming out. The men inside jumped out, opened the door of my car, dragged my passenger out and started beating him. Then they threw him in their car, turned around, and went back on the base. At that point I convinced the guard that I was going to go on the base and see the commandant. I asked where his residence was, and drove there. His orderlies—that's the wrong word for those people at that time, they were chaotic, disorderly—said he was there, he would see me, would I sit down. I sat on a chair on the terrace and waited, declined a drink. I said I wanted to see the commander of the base, a Major newly assigned there. Finally he came out, drunk. A real mean s.o.b. I had seen him in action before. He started off with a menacing tone but I just sat and waited, talked, and said I had reason to believe that my employee was there and also Gerard's friend who had been with me. I said, “I'd like very much to have you release them. The car that was taken was not a stolen car. I can give you papers on that.” I asked him why his men carried no identification papers and he told me that if they identified themselves the operation would not be secret. Finally, my waiting paid off and he released Gerard to me but I refused to leave until Gerard's friend was also released to me. Eventually they brought the second one. It took a long time, but they brought him. I put them in the car and left the base.

That kind of thing was happening. There were road blocks manned by soldiers in rag-tag uniforms, often drunk, and they were very dangerous. Sometimes I heard they would stop a car and ask the driver for his driver's license. When the driver would hand them

his driver's license one of them would put it in his pocket and say, “Where is your driver's license? You don't have a driver's license?” And the driver had to pay to get the license back. There were other similar cases of people being beaten, or arrested on a pretext. For the most part, the authorities were unhelpful in such cases. In fact, they were the instigators in most of them. So, dealing with the authorities was always a challenge.

The General who was in charge of the Karanga military district had a taste for Remy Martin cognac, maybe because his middle name was Remy, and somewhere he had a taste for Remy Martin cognac. He very often would finish a bottle of it by himself while we were together talking, making intelligible conversation difficult after a time. An amusing incident occurred the first time I called on him at his headquarters. His luxurious salon was lined with shelves and on them was a collection of electronic gear of all kinds—that is, record players, amplifiers, turntables and all sorts of sound equipment. It was obvious that he hadn't bought them, had found them somewhere, probably in a Belgian household. Background music was playing, sort of a dirge, I thought. I couldn't identify the music but there was something familiar about it. The General finally came in, and as we talked I mentioned the music. He implied that he was a man of some culture and Beethoven was one of his favorites. It turned out that he had a 3-3/4 IPS Beethoven tape but was playing it at l-7/8, half speed, and didn't know the difference.

Q: Tape recorder at half speed.

NEHER: ...at half speed. That's the kind of officer we had to deal with. We had to deal with him on security problems, on the people who were being stopped at night in the streets, and we had to get access to the General in the most important cases. The governor in office when I arrived was a very rational, educated and able governor. The second one too; his wife became a friend of my wife. We cultivated them very quickly as we had the first governor, and were sure to invite them for dinners. They liked to dance, so we gave dancing parties pretty much organized around them in order to strengthen the social contact and make access easier when we needed it. We identified some of the more

enlightened military people, invited them in for those social functions, and got to know them pretty well. But it was always tricky. The last governor they sent in while I was there was not reachable. There was no way to communicate effectively with him. He was from a different part of the country and a different era of Congolese history. It was difficult to have rational give-and-take at any time. He was bejewelled with gold rings, wore more than one gold watch. It was very difficult to do business if you had a problem of some kind, or if you had to develop a program for high level visitors coming to the province. It was very hard to find out what he...

Q: I'm thinking of a researcher whose looking at this, hasn't dealt with the Foreign Service. Here you are, you've got these things, I mean its a pretty chaotic situation. How did you feel about reporting it back both to the Embassy, and to Washington? Because there's always the problem if you make it too vivid ,you really are hurting your whole program there and everything else. How did you deal with that?

NEHER: First of all, you have to be honest about it, but situations like that existed all over Africa. Nobody back in Washington, none of the professionals who back you up, needs to read about them, or wants to. You talk about corruption in your area, putting it in perspective. When you have problems, obviously you've got to report them. If you have any consular staff who's arrested or anything of that sort, you've got to report it. And you have to say what action you took. So you do all that but you assume that as long as things are progressing, and our policies are being effectively implemented, and we're getting what we think we can from that government, you just let it go. It's very practical, very pragmatic. I suppose if you were to report factually what happens on, say, the zoning board meetings in Albuquerque, New Mexico, you'd be arrested and put in jail. So you have to select what people need to know, and you have to do it with relative candor. But you've got to be very selective, and you've got to understand what the effects will be from your reporting. From a little post like Lubumbashi you probably could write a kind of report that would leak to Congress, and risk getting aid blocked to the country because of some little local disorders. You can't do that. You have to know the effect you want, and you

have to present the material in an African perspective. If there's a question of protection of American citizens, your Consulate staff, you may have to weigh in with words that nobody in Kinshasa or Washington wants to hear, but you may have to do that. But you sure can't remake the world, and you can't say, “We want a perfect government here in this African country, and we want the people to be correct.” You can't do it. You're not going to accomplish anything.

Q: How far in Lubumbashi did the writ of Mobutu run? Did you feel there was a strong central control there, or not?

NEHER: The ultimate authority came down from him, appointments and so forth. He could dismiss, he could do that, he would discipline his military forces. He actually went down to Lubumbashi some months before I got there, and lined up some malfaiteurs and shot them—evil doers, bandits, robbers—and had them shot right there. He had the ultimate authority, over the Army, over his security services. The authority was limited because of limited funds available, but the authority of appointments was an important one, and he had that authority. But when you left the urban centers, like Lubumbashi, and you went out into villages, the thing that you were immediately conscious of was, the pull of the traditional tribal administration. If these were diligent people, if the chief was a good person, a hard worker and honest, the village would be clean, there would be flowers around houses and the children would be well clothed and well fed, indicating abundant harvests. You'd go into another village and you'd find that the chief was a drunk, or was not interested, or was diseased, and you'd find weeds growing everywhere, and roofs not being repaired on the houses. So you realized that the writ of the central government didn't reach these people. It was the local, the tribal, that was the big thing in their lives. In the Lunda area in particular, where the Lunda are the main tribe.

Q: L-u-n-d-a?

NEHER: Yes, which is a corruption. In many languages, an “r” is hard to pronounce, and people pronounce it as an “l”. It happens in Chinese and Japanese and in some parts of Spain. In the Lunda tribal area of Zaire, neighboring tribes are used to terminating most words with vowels, so in referring to these people, who are really called urund, that's the best rendition, the “r” is converted to the “l” and then they put a vowel on the end. They are trying to say urund and it comes out lunda. The Lunda in western Katanga province have had a long connection with the Methodist Church. The missionaries got there many, many years ago. They keep very strong ties. There is a fine hospital and leper treatment center at the Lunda's chief town of the Lunda, Kapanga, and the tribal leaders have been diligent, hard-working, God-fearing people. You can tell that immediately. Their towns are clean, the harvests abundant, the kids are healthy. They've got a good, simple system of justice that's fair, and you ask yourself, “Where's the central government in all this? Where's Mobutu? Where are the ministries?” Nowhere.

Q: How did you deal with the problem of corruption? Zaire is known as one of the great corrupt states in some cases. Maybe I'm being unfair.

NEHER: No. It's true.

Q: You have AID, you have Peace Corps. You had all sorts of things going and here's corruption. How did you deal with that?

NEHER: It didn't affect us very much because we didn't have program funds that we administered except the small Self Help Program. There we had problems. Corruption was pervasive. For example, we had a very small project with the boy scouts. I think it was only something like $80.00 to put a heavy plank across a ditch that separated a growing, sprawling community from the marketplace. Well, the scout master ran away with the $80.00. Corruption penetrated right down to pretty much the lowest levels. So in our Self Help Program we had to watch very carefully.

And within the Consulate we had a problem. I noticed that the gasoline consumption seemed to be out of proportion to the amount of driving we were doing with our vehicles. So I got the records together— unfortunately our administrative officer was not very resourceful at the time—and took a look at them, and when I checked the mileage on these vehicles, and it was just incredibly small. I tried to straighten that out and nothing seemed to work, so then I simply assigned one of the vehicles on weekends to each one of the responsible Americans in the Consulate, and had him do a mileage check. Then I established mileage goals for each of the vehicles and told the drivers, “That's what you're going to get in the way of mileage, and the driver who doesn't get that mileage, is fired.” And we stopped it. Corruption did come right into the Consulate. You had to be just on your toes, but luckily we didn't administer funds except for a very small Self Help program.

Q: Then let's move on, shall we? You were next assigned from 1972 to '74 to Chad as Deputy Chief of Mission. What were your main responsibilities there?

NEHER: When I arrived there was no Ambassador, so I arrived as Charge. I got there the first part of October. The Ambassador came and presented his credentials in November.

Q: This was Edward Mulcahy?

NEHER: Mulcahy. By the end of November he had presented his credentials, so I could be DCM. In that short period of time I was in full charge of all the embassy's operations. Then after that, because I had already got up to speed and was enjoying the busy schedule, the Ambassador liked my style. We had known each other before and were on a first-name basis. I was full of energy and enthusiasm and Mulcahy was a very intelligent man—very balanced, very calm, and had excellent judgment. He let me run with a lot of the affairs of the Embassy, especially with the management of our drought relief operations.

The date of my arrival coincided with the date of the release of a report by a French team that had looked at the drought situation in Chad. It was the first report that alerted all of us,

and the world, to the seriousness of the drought and the famine that was likely to follow. It described a calamity, and neither the government nor the donor agencies, who had known there was a drought, understood the extent of it until this team produced the report. Once that report was distributed—it went to the UN and all foreign governments—everybody geared up to organize relief. Its effect was rather like that of the drought picturers coming in from Ethiopia somewhat later.

Q: You are talking about the Ethiopian pictures of starvation.

NEHER: Of starvation. So immediately we had to gear up to do something to respond to the needs of the Chadians. There was no USAID mission in Chad, and I became the coordinator of the efforts in the absence of USAID. I ran the AID program, the drought relief program, from then on. I had come to the post in 1972, and we got our first AID permanent employee only in 1974, just four or five months before I was to leave. In the meantime, there I was. The staff consisted of the Ambassador, myself as DCM, an Economic/Consular Officer, an Admin Officer, and a GSO along with communications and secretarial staff. That was it, and we had big programs to implement, and lots of visitors to handle.

Q: When you say a big program, what were you doing?

NEHER: Mostly PL 480 emergency food supplies that had to be brought in. We had temporary missions of AID people and military people coming in with flights of food in C-130s. We shipped a whole lot of food by truck from Lagos. There were difficult negotiations with the Chadian truckers' organization, including a problem of trucks owned by the wife of the president. And there were negotiations with the host government and problems of coordination with other donors—who is doing what and where. And then we had to get out in the countryside too, in the absence of reliable information from the government. I liked that duty best of all. So we'd get in the old Landrover and go out

across the desert to a village and survey the needs. Then we'd go back to N'Djamena, the capital, and arrange for relief.

Q: Having come from Zaire, was there a difference in dealing with the people in Chad, the government?

NEHER: A very different kind of people. There was corruption at high levels, as well as at lower levels. But there was not the kind of very scary, unpredictable situation in Zaire. There was no drunken general, there were no abusive road blocks. I didn't see anybody abuse alcohol or any kind of drugs. So you could make appointments with people, you could talk with them, you could have rational programs laid on in dealing with people who understood. The level of education was far superior in Chad, especially among those in the administration, to what we had in Zaire. Even at the secondary levels you had people with advanced degrees, and people running technical bureaus. In Zaire, usually if you got down to a level below the top and the few people who had advanced studies, you had to deal with some pretty minimally educated people. It was a very different place. These are people of the Sahel and the upland savannah, and of a very different culture. Islam, the dominant religion, has a great effect. Islam doesn't foster as much superstition and witchcraft as does the Congolese culture. There's very little of it. You have the Marabout, and the fortune tellers, but there isn't so much reliance on magic, and the role of the witch doctor or shaman is less important. so prevalent. The society is more rational in our sense of the word, with a much more modern kind of thinking, and reactions are more predictable when discussing programs and plans.

The exception to this was the president himself. Tombalbaye. He began to suspect that others were plotting against him and that he could rely only on his fellow tribesmen from the south—the Sara. So he decreed that only those who had gone through the initiation ceremonies of his tribe could be trusted and any Sara who had missed out on that rite had to go back to the village and do it. Even the 40-something Foreign Minister had to do it. It almost killed him. And Tombalbaye began to consult two Haitian voodoo practitioners

to divine who might be plotting against him. This turn in the president brought about his downfall a year after I left Chad.

Q: What was our interest in Chad? I would have thought that we would have sat back and said, "This is a French problem. We'll let the French be the leaders, and our role is very secondary."

NEHER: It was. We did not have much of a sense of competition with the French for the hearts and minds of the Chadians. We didn't speak their language. We didn't have significant educational exchanges between the two countries. But at that time it was the policy of the United States to have a presence in each of these countries, and to make English language a vehicle. People would listen to our radio broadcasts, read our publications; we wanted to create an audience. I suppose it's because we weren't sure that our interests would always coincide with those of France. And then when it came to aid, we were far better placed to respond in emergencies. We had money for airplanes. We had the airplanes, the big C-130s and the French had nothing comparable. They had the Transall, which is a fraction of the C-130. So we responded, and we responded fully to the Chadian emergency, and I spent the bulk of my time working on that.

Q: How did it come out while you were there? How did you see our program? Do you feel it was effective?

NEHER: Yes. It was effective. We got the food into the country, we got it distributed, we saved a lot of lives. As for the aid projects that always come on the heels of emergency programs—because you've got lots of money now; we've got to spend it on something—they were almost universally failures, inevitably failures. There was no way to do grain silos, or cattle corridors, or wells that would not go dry. And then, I think it was in 1975, a year after I left for my next assignment, President Tombalbaye was assassinated and Chad went into a period of even greater instability which just has ended within the last two years. So there's no reason to think those projects might have survived. They didn't

survive. But we were effective in what we did. I am sometimes invited to speak to the new hires of AID, people who are going to Africa. I try to give them a different perspective, the Ambassador's perspective on AID programs, a perspective distinct from their own. I mention Chad sometimes. If you say that because there's nothing left of the projects, because none of them succeeded and survived, they have failed. The Ambassador may say, “No, the programs have succeeded marvelously.” Because their purpose was, in fact, to demonstrate to the Chadian government and people, and to the international community that we would respond to their distress. We had no illusions about the durability of the projects and programs for Chad. We, the government, were also responding to the demands of media-driven U.S. public opinion that we do something. We also wanted to have access to the Chadian leaders, to be able to talk to them when there was reason for interaction. All these efforts succeeded. And therefore, in spite of the fact that all those AID-financed structures are covered with dust, an Ambassador could consider these programs successful. An AID director would have to say they were not. More recently, our aid programs were designed to help keep Qadhafi's hands off Chad, and here too they succeeded.

Q: Qadhafi is the leader of Libya.

NEHER: Although when I was there, that wasn't the main concern. It became that about a year after I left.

Q: When you left, again, as part of this peculiar hopping around was very atypical of the Foreign Service, particularly going to a Latin American assignment as Political Counselor. You went to Santo Domingo from '74 to '77. This is really an odd ball because I would have thought this was...was this part of the global outlook program of Henry Kissinger, wanting to mix up the assignment process to bring people with a different point of view, particularly I think, was “strong Latin America” wasn't it?

NEHER: That may have been what made the offer come, but it wasn't my reason for accepting. Mine was back on my original decision to see the world. You're in the African Sahara and you're offered an island in the Caribbean, what can be a greater change? I turned down—I just replied “no” I wasn't interested to an overture that came to me from an Ambassador in another African country. He wanted me to come as DCM. From the career point of view, it would have been a much greater step up than going as the Political Counselor in Santo Domingo. But I turned it down because, after talking with my family, we all said, “No, we didn't join the Foreign Service for that, to be important. We joined to see the world.” So I took it in spite of the fact that there'd be no ORE, and there'd be no real status.

Q: ORE is...

NEHER: Official Residence Expenses. You know, the Department provides residences for DCM's and pays lots of the expenses of maintaining and running an official household—supplies, equipment, gardener and inside staff. It's a big addition to your income; you're no longer out of pocket for these expenditures. I took the Santo Domingo assignment knowing I'd have to go out and rent my own house and bring my own furniture and be farther down the pecking order in the embassy, but I'd be in the Caribbean speaking Spanish instead of in Africa speaking French. That's why I took it.

Q: In 1974 what was the situation as you saw it in Santo Domingo?

NEHER: The government was really a continuation of the one that we helped to put into power after the disorders in 1965. There was leftist uprising in 1965, and President Johnson was determined not to have another Vietnam or Cuba on our doorstep, so he sent in the Air Force and Marines ostensibly to protect American lives but in fact to prevent a leftist, possibly communist government from coming into power. Then in the election of 1966, Joaquin Balaguer won and remained in power through succeeding elections. He had been president of the republic while Trujillo was in fact the dictator. But in my time in the

Dominican Republic, the United States wanted to encourage the country to move toward true democracy. We felt some responsibility for that country, and there was an election coming up in 1978. We had to try to help, to midwife, the whole process—the election process—the campaigns, the selection of candidates, alignment of parties. We played a fairly direct role. Unlike anything I'd done in Africa, or anywhere else, we were really very much involved.

Q: This is still in '74?

NEHER: '74. Their Central Intelligence Agency was created by ours, and people were trained by ours. We had very close ties to all the top military people. Most of the leaders had been educated in the United States. Some of the contenders in the election, the most important candidates, were people we had helped keep out of power. We had a long history of intervention in the country, and the Dominicans assumed that we still exercised political power there. So we had enormous influence. We were now using it to encourage them to move in a democratic way, and to dissuade the reasonable left from maintaining ties with the radical parties and groupings of the extreme left. Among those far left activists there were real bomb throwers. I mean they were killers. The people were Marxist in that special wild Latin American sense of the word, not in the European sense. They were violently anti-Yankee. So we had to try to deal with that, and see if we could get this process moving toward a free election with rational parties competing. And after the election, we wanted to be sure the very conservative military would in fact honor the results of the election if the leftists won. As Political Counselor I was in the thick of this effort.

Q: How comfortable did you feel in this pro-Consular role?

NEHER: Very comfortable. No discomfort at all.

Q: Even though you came in as a...this would have been just the type of thing, I think, you would have been opposed to as a young officer?

NEHER: No, because there the regime which had been in power was quite corrupt, very arbitrary. Very reactionary, representing the landed aristocracy, the new rich and the corrupt, abusive military who were the remnants of the old Trujillo dictatorship. An election could bring new people and new ideas into the political picture and defuse some of the antagonisms between the government and the most progressive forces in the society. From my point of view, that alone is a reason to do something. Relations between the regime and the university, for example, were such that no government representative would dare to step on the property of the university or even go near it. He would literally be killed. In one incident which happened while I was there, a policeman riding in a taxi drove too close to the university. Students stopped it, pulled the policeman out, and killed him. The university was autonomous, self-governing, and completely radicalized. The leftist parties and their rallies were harassed, sometimes declared illegal, and the police moved against them. They broke up the rallies, beat people. Even the main party in contention, the Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD), had not been allowed to hold rallies on most occasions. There was always harassment, and this was no way to build a democratic system. So our job was to try to stimulate the process. How did we do this? Ambassador Hurwitch, the Ambassador at the time, had absolutely first rate political insights and judgments.

Q: This was Robert Hurwitch?

NEHER: Robert Hurwitch. He was very astute, and sharp. He knew Latin America from years of experience at a high level in the Department. He knew what he was doing, and it was great to work with him as Political Counselor, even though he was difficult as a person. And he had influence, enormous influence in the country, and as a key member of his staff I shared that influence. The people I was talking to knew I was close to Ambassador Hurwitch and that Hurwitch was talking with the president, and General this,

and General that. We had a strategy that was to let the main opposition party know clearly that if they shed their irresponsible Marxist allies, with whom they had been grouped with previously, we would not consider them a threat against any U.S. interests. We let that be known both to them and to the more conservative, ruling party. We organized big receptions which brought together all the responsible parties in contention in the run-up to the election, making sure to mix generals with professors, rich landholders with labor leaders, businessmen with journalists and made sure that photo opportunities would be rife, newsworthy ones where they were seen shaking hands with political enemies. There they were, together, joking, drinking or in serious discussion. They had no other places to meet, no other occasions. Their political worlds touched at these functions. We also brought scholars and intellectuals from universities in the United States and sponsored discussions among left and right on a range of topics from literature to government. So these political activists were pictured in the newspapers and on television fairly often. They appeared as the responsible, respectable middle class people that they really were. They were well dressed and would be seen discussing with this General, or with that government official. It helped to legitimate, you might say, these political parties, particularly the most serious contender, PRD. It encouraged the PRD to maintain a moderate, middle of the road stance and signaled to the governing party and the military leaders that we, the U.S., viewed them as legitimate contenders in the election—a sort of “hands off” warning. And they won the election. But the military moved in immediately, seized the ballot boxes, tried to prevent the vote from being counted. And the U.S.—I was gone by that time—virtually threatened military intervention. The theater commander came up from Panama and met with the Dominican military and with the people who had been legitimately elected, and finally the ballot boxes were returned and the election results were honored.

To illustrate how artificial the tension between the government and the left was, the newly elected president went down to the university and attended the graduation ceremony. And when he walked into hall he got a standing ovation. The tension had disappeared. It had

been artificial, imposed by the excessive security concerns of the regime and its hard-line military. It was gone. And some of these people that the military thought were communists —and even some of our own security services agreed—turned out to be very moderate and, in fact, rather conservative people.

Q: Well, tell me about within the Embassy. I mean, here we were pushing something but you mentioned the military—our military—because obviously this was an important element, so I'm sure attach#s were very much involved in what essentially was a political situation, and the CIA. Can you describe some of the trends within the Embassy on this? How different groups either approached it, or thought we should deal with the problem?

NEHER: The key factor in all of this was a very strong and knowledgeable Ambassador. And when he set the policy, he damned well insisted that it be followed. We had deviations from it. We got a report back on a conversation that our Military Attach# had had with a Dominican military officer in which he was suggesting that the United States really didn't want to see this PRD come to power. That these were communists. And that Attach# was very conservative; he himself thought they were communists. But he had no political criteria or intellectual capacity for judging them, and when he talked to this, one of the toughest military leaders, and implied the United States did not want to see the PRD come to power he was way out of line. It was a dangerous gambit which could have implied that the Dominican military would have a green light from the U.S. to move in and stop the democratic process. So the Ambassador got him into his office—I was there—and at his scathing finest told him he was on the next plane out if he ever said anything like that again. He was ordered to go back and correct that mistaken impression. Which he did. It was absolutely essential that everyone on the U.S. team have the same line. We were all on board, all agreed with the policy, and agreed that we had to work together in harmony.

Q: Did you find the CIA...

NEHER: No, the CIA from the beginning was right down the line with the Ambassador. We didn't have any evidence that the CIA was playing a separate game, or was communicating anything different at all. We thought they played it square, and they were very helpful, and very cooperative. We had meetings where we discussed strategy, who would do this and who would do that. The CIA had the best connection with the high ranking military, better than the Defense Attach#. They were on board entirely.

Q: Did we see much of a Cuban menace there at the time? How concerned were we about Cuba and its influence?

NEHER: What happened...go back to 1965. During the abortive rising by the left, sparked by a call to arms by Francisco Pena Gomez, the head of the PRD, President Johnson sent the FBI down there to help with security; he wasn't sure the CIA could do the job. So he sent the FBI down primarily to look at those involved and document the ones who were dangerous to U.S. interests. The FBI loaded up the biographic records. They found lots of communists. Anybody who was at all radical risked being documented as a communist.

When I arrived in Santa Domingo this was still a problem. Back in Washington, people at State, CIA or Defense could conclude that most of these people were dangerous to the security of the U.S. But we knew they were not, had good evidence that many of those documented by the FBI as communists had never belonged to the party or to any marxist party. So we set out to change the records in Washington and make it possible for these people, who were destined to become very important in the Dominican Republic, to get visas to the U.S. We started a vigorous and comprehensive program of biographic reporting, correcting the misinformation in the files in Washington. My deputy in the political section was an exceptionally able reporter. He had a fabulous memory and great access to political activists. We did dozens of in-depth biographic reports and made it impossible for anybody in Washington to contend that this or that person was a communist, or a menace to the United States. We documented these people for what they were, and they were leftist moderates for the most part, not even the radicals that

the records showed that they were. The PRD member who would become the Foreign Minister in 1978 couldn't get a visa couldn't get a visa to enter the United States without a special exception under a section of the Immigration and Nationality Act. These people, documented as extremists were probably more conservative than middle of the road Republicans in our own country, and certainly as conservative as some of the people in the Balaguer government. They were landowners, businessmen, professionals committed to the stability of the country. But the records showed that...

Q: In the first place I would imagine the FBI would have come in with almost absolute ignorance of the situation. And two, this would be under J. Edgar Hoover, and probably came down with a mandate and really almost from the President on up.

NEHER: You couldn't go wrong if you said, “These are all commies.” You couldn't go wrong by offering that judgment. That was the road to promotion in the FBI.

Q: And then to untangle this mess, one had to do a counter job.

NEHER: We did it, and the leftist party won, and was never a threat to the United States. In fact, it was a much more rational government than that of Balaguer. It held cabinet meetings, chose technically qualified people for ministries, debated the budget and scrapped the old, secret system that Balaguer created. The parliament was also a more rational, modern one and the debates were more informative. The PRD brought a lot of advantages, helped to root democracy, which had been our long term goal. Unfortunately, the PRD government was even more corrupt than that of Balaguer. One scandal after another swept the country. And in a final disgusting note, President Guzman committed suicide before the end of his term, some say out of shame for the corruption, even by his own family.

Q: Then we'll keep moving on this. We'll talk about the environmental. You went to be in charge of international programs at the...

NEHER: ...not in charge.

Q: You dealt with international programs at the Environmental Agency from '77 to '79. That was a sort of odd ball assignment. How did you get it, and what were you doing?

NEHER: I was finishing up in Santo Domingo, and I think I had not even indicated where I wanted to go next, or offered any suggestions for an onward assignment. Part of that adventuring spirit I treasured meant that it was more fun if you didn't have any idea where you would go next. I mean, choose a continent, or choose something like that... I got a call from a friend at EPA, John Blane, who had been the DCM in Chad when I went there to replace him. We overlapped there for a couple of weeks, so he knew me. He had been at EPA as an assistant for international programs. He told me it was a great job, asked me to come up for an interview. He'd send me a ticket; EPA would pay for my flight. Hop on a plane, come up and talk to the people and see if it was something I wanted, and if I did, I could have it. So I got on a plane, and came up, and I talked to them. There was a problem I recognized right away. The people he had worked with for two years had left, and there was a new wave of people, new Carter administration people, mostly women and with ties to Atlanta. They had a very different view of their work and of their place in Washington, and I wasn't quite sure that I understood what they were talking about, what they wanted me to do. But because John Blane had promoted the work so enthusiastically, I accepted it. So I went back and finished my tour in Santo Domingo and then reported to EPA. I wasn't in the job more than a couple of hours until I realized it was the wrong one for me. It was a bad decision. The people were...I didn't know how to deal with. I think a large part was my fault, but it was a fault that I couldn't correct even if I went back today. These people were sort of free-wheelers, they were name-droppers, they were people who had to mention Hamilton Jordan or Jody Powell in most every sentence, and they were preoccupied with their place in the pecking order. They were also very secretive. Here I was, an Africa hand, I supposed they wanted me to give advice and guidance on programs destined to that continent, keep them informed about important developments there

and around the world that might affect EPA programs. One of these we had to decide was, where in the developing world EPA should invest its time and resources to further environmental progress, what countries to work with and in what ways. I established a set of criteria to help identify those countries. It included a commitment to real support by the host government. I mean they had to express an interest, assign personnel to work on the programs, make funds available, etc. And the initiative should in part come from them, and not just from us in Washington. We were beginning to zero in on some countries, and one day an EPA employee walked into my office and said, “You've been to Africa. We're going to need to know something about Nigeria before we go on this mission.” I said, “What mission is that?” It turned out that they had selected two people from EPA to go to Nigeria, and my boss, the associate administrator, had been involved in that selection. Two people who had never been to Africa, didn't know anything about it, and I hadn't even been consulted. I couldn't understand why she wouldn't come to me and say, “Guess what we're planning? Is this a good country to go to?” and I'd prepare background papers. And of course I should have been at the top of the list to go to Nigeria. I should have been head of that mission. But at any rate, there was not even an ability to discuss it with her. She wasn't interested in discussing it. The decision had been made. These people were going, and they went, and came back, and it was a complete failure. The mission was unbelievably silly. The conclusions they came to were uninformed and ridiculous. But it turned out, in fact, that one of the reasons they had chosen that country, and sent those people, was that the Deputy Administrator of EPA wanted to visit Nigeria. So she sent them there as a signal of her interest in going to that country. Then she would go, be received by the president of Nigeria and be photographed with him, then go on her way to Addis Ababa for the UNEP, leading a nine-member mission to discuss a potential minuscule program. At that point the initiative is out of control. I mean, it doesn't make any sense. You haven't got any resources to put into a country like Nigeria. The environmental problems are enormous. The two who came back showed me a draft of their report. I was the only one who they could find to consult. They wanted detailed comments on it but I simply had to send it back to them. I sent it back with a memo saying only, “Welcome

to Africa." The report was unsalvageable. The two had arrived at the Lagos airport and had had the normal miserable, impossible trip from there to the hotel. They found the hotel, in which the electricity failed from time to time; they drove through the city of Lagos, saw abandoned, vandalized or cannibalized vehicles, dirt, no sewers and came to the conclusion that EPA should help to clean up the city of Lagos. At that point you know there is no way to salvage the report. It's just hopeless.

So anyway I did a number of things, none of them very useful. I helped set up a computerized system of controlling international travel, to try to relate the amount of money being spent on travel to the agency's priorities. We got that pretty well in hand by the time I left there. You could punch a computer and say, "How much are we spending now for travel on international programs—category 1, 2 and 3?" But it was not a successful assignment.

Q: Next you were Staff Director of the Board of Examiners which essentially runs the Board of Examiners, doesn't it?

NEHER: It runs the operations. The person who deals directly with the Board is the Executive Director. The Staff Director is the one who runs all the operations. The examination, the recruiting, all of that is the Staff Director's job.

Q: There's an awful lot of heat, more, probably, than I can think of in any other recruiting, promotion, assignment—not assignment—both recruiting and selecting process of anywhere in the government. The Foreign Service, being known as an elite, and concern that we may be cloning our people who are all New England, Ivy League, conservative, white Anglo-Saxon, male, Protestants, etc. Could you talk about that aspect? The pressures on you to see that we were getting a representative type of Foreign Service Officer, and the implications of this?

NEHER: I could probably give you more on that than you'd want to know, but you were over there.

Q: I served there from '75 to '76. But I'd like to get something on the record about this.

NEHER: The first thing you have to know is that the examination is called a...its validity is based on its content, a process called content validation, in technical terms. There's a strict procedure by which you set one of those up. First of all, you do a job description. What do we do in the Foreign Service? What's a Consular Officer do? What is an Administrative Officer? What is an Economic Officer? And then you go down the line and you say, “What qualities are needed to do these jobs well? What skills, knowledges (don't you hate that term?), intellectual and personal qualities are necessary for an officer? But remember that the desired qualities and attributes of a Consular Officer, a Political Officer, an Economic Officer, a USIA officer might be quite different. Then, once you identify the qualities, you have to continue the process, “Well, how much of that quality?” Can you tell a difference in performance if a person has a lot of that quality, or a little of it or none? For example, for an Administrative Officer how much knowledge of the Constitution of the United States should he or she have? How much difference does it make in performance? And the answer is, it's minimal. But how about the Political Officer? Yes, indeed, that officer has to have a thorough knowledge of the Constitution. He or she's going to be sitting in seminars, debating with foreign students, discussing governance with counterparts in foreign governments, and must know a lot about the country. How about the USIA officer? Absolutely, even more than the Political Officer. Then what about management, the management of resources, for example? What should an officer know? Economic Officers, nothing at all. They're not going to manage anything more than a secretary in a normal career. But the Administrative Officer...well, you get the picture. So you come up with a list of qualities and a quantification of how much of each a candidate should have to do the job well. You then design a written examination in which every question has to be identifiable as measuring those qualities. And you test the questions

back and forth with teams of examiners. The Educational Testing Service in Princeton is the technical assistant in this, an agent. But the whole process is run by the Board of Examiners. The Staff Director, his staff, as you know, sit over there and mull over the questions, try them on each other, and then sit down with ETS, write new questions, and weigh them, and finally come up with an examination.

Now, if you give this examination to anybody who walks into an examination anywhere across the country, you always have virtually the same passing ratio among your candidates. I'm speaking, of course, about my own time at the Board. Let's say you have a certain pass rate for minorities. For women, all women, you have twice that pass rate. For all men, you have twice the women's pass rate. It's a 1-2-4 ratio, and you cannot seem to change it no matter how you try in the selection of questions or what objective standards you set in the process. If you have the questions that are based on the job description, that exam, you're going to get a 1-2-4 pass rate. The problem is that today we cannot accept such a discriminatory rate. We cannot hire at a 1-2-4 rate. You can't do it that way. So you have to start looking for modifications, how to get a fair share of women and minorities? The first question you ask is, why do you have this kind of distribution? And it turns out that, in fact, the people who score high on the exam are people who have been interested in foreign affairs, have developed pertinent skills, have studied hard in good colleges. They have subscribed to magazines. They belong to associations. It's the ones who have had the most rigorous educations and who are very much involved who get the high scores.

For example, I was just recently over at the Board of Examiners. I was thinking of doing something for the Foreign Service Journal, or for State magazine or whatever, on that examination process and the dilemma they have now where that might lead them to abandon the written exam. And I noticed that most of the universities and colleges in the country had pass rates that were very low. In fact, most of them had a zero percent pass rate on the 1987 written exam, the last one I looked at.

Q: You're talking about people...

NEHER: College. You go down the line and start looking at colleges. Take a whole lot of colleges, and most of the colleges have a zero percent pass rate. That is, of all the people who graduate from those colleges, none of them pass. Because I was interested in the question of pass rates for women and men on this exam and at educational backgrounds, I looked at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Smith, Bryn Mawr and Vassar, and everyone had around a 60 percent pass rate. People who had been educated in these schools passed the exam at a sixty-percent rate, compared to zero percent for those from most other schools. You have to say, “Why do you have 60 percent of the women from Bryn Mawr pass, and 60 percent of the men from Princeton, and yet your national ratio is a 1-2-4?” It tells you, first, who's showing up for the exam. The people who are coming in to sit for the written exam, especially the women all across the country, are less qualified by formal education. It's either a choice of academic concentration or a lack of rigor in the systems through which they have come. They apparently have shown less interest and have less experience than the men in relevant activities. More of the men have had this kind of background. They're not smarter than the women, or the minorities, but they've had more relevant studies, perhaps more rigor, and they've been interested in these things. I was at BEX during the Carter administration, which was very strongly committed, philosophically and politically, to more balance of gender and ethnicity in the Foreign Service. And if you're committed to the examination process, as I had to be as Staff Director of BEX, you've got to ask, “How do we get a pass rate on the examination that is approximately equal for men and women, and how do we get enough minorities through a system based on an examination?” That's a dilemma, and the pressures on the Board of Examiners, on me in particular, were enormous. I won't mention who it was, but one of the senior people involved actually had to go to the toilet and vomit. I mean repeatedly. The pressures were that intense. I didn't have that reaction, but there were some people who couldn't take that kind of pressure.

Here's an example of the kind of problem we faced. We had a very attractive young black woman who missed the oral exam by one point. She had been recommended and

coached by a high official of the Department of State, who was determined to see that she passed the examination and entered the Foreign Service. She would no doubt have made a good officer, but she hadn't passed the exam. And as defender of the integrity of the exam, you have to say “no”. And you've have to say “no” against pressures from almost the very top of the State Department. Terrible pressures, but you have to say “no”.

Q: Part of your thinking, was there ever a way of saying, “Okay, let's give a...” To get into the civil service at one time you gave 5 percent or 10 percent to veterans, and if you were a wounded veteran, you got more. Why not have an automatic write up of women, or minorities?

NEHER: As for the women, they'd never accept that. It says that they can't compete on a par with men. They have to have an examination structured so that that they pass at the same rate as men do. And I believe that's what the court has ordered, that the rate of passing must be the same, without weighting.

Q: In the first place—I may be wrong on this—and take it from me, I'm a white Anglo-Saxon male, but also with two daughters whom I want to see move ahead in the world. But when the men and women, and you always also on the Board—I know in our little panels, when we would have the oral exam, we'd always make absolutely sure we had a woman, particularly if there was a woman being examined. We could read the writing on the wall as well as anyone else, and so, women when they go before the oral exam, my impression was, they were given the benefit of the doubt by judgement. I mean an examiner would not last very long if they were showing a prejudice against women. So that women are already getting an inflated score. I'm not trying to knock this because obviously at a certain level the people from certain schools, who have taken an interest, they're passing at the same rate as men. But, would you say the net result of this is basically to lower it so you can get more women and minorities, that you're bringing in a less qualified group of people.

NEHER: What we did there—and it worked effectively for a number of years—that we did all the time I was there for the men and women ratio, is that we had the examination scored on the English expression test, and the general background test, and then the for the four separate cones—political, economic, consular and administrative. The first year that I came to the Board, and it was too late to make any changes in the examination that was going to be given in December, was that there were 100 questions on the English expression, and 100 on the general background. Then there were a number of questions on each of the cones, but these were not scored as pass-fail. It was only the first two, and you could actually get an even pass rate of men and women by setting the cut scores of those two scored exams. The higher you raised the cut score—the cut score is the raw score that you choose to convert to seventy, the minimum passing grade—the higher you raised it on the English expression, the greater proportion of women passed, and the lower you moved it on the general background, the higher percentage of women you got through the part. So if you're going to have a 2-to-1 men-to-women raw pass rate, which is the normal for this exam—say that 30 percent of the men would pass and only 15 percent of the women, you raise your cut score on one, and lower your cut score on the other and you get 20-20. You get 20 percent pass rate for women. Twenty percent of all the women who took the exam passed it. Twenty percent of all the men who took the exam passed it. You have equal pass rates.

Well, that worked, but what I found when I got there was that they had a single set of qualities that were being measured, a single set of standards. If you scored high enough you passed, if not, you failed. But you're going to have to bring through the exam administrators, GSOs, Consular Officers, Economic Officers and Political Officers, all with one set of qualities. In effect what you're saying is, “There is an ideal Foreign Service Officer who has these qualities.” The closer a candidate approaches that ideal, the more likely to get a passing grade. But which is the ideal? Is it the GSO? Is it the Political Officer, the Economic? It can't be the same. We do such different jobs. So I said, “That is an illusion about what the Foreign Service is.” Because the ideal Foreign Service Officer is

going to be a person from a very privileged background. He's going to have gone to the Ivy League schools. He's going to have done the grand tour of Europe with Aunt Mame, and stayed in the best hotels and in the spas. He's going to have written the definitive thesis on Sino-Soviet relations while he was at Harvard Graduate School, etc. And you're going to assign him as a GSO. And he's terrible at that. At the same time you've flunked out a guy who has been interested in international affairs, and this is an example I presented Under Secretary Ben Read when I got this basic change made in the exam, His father runs a chain of liquor stores in Washington, he's an interested citizen, he's got a good educational background, he does the inventory for his father, he set up the control of the vehicles and the leases of vehicles, etc. He does some of the accounting, and he's active in community affairs. Ideal for your Administrative Officer. And what do you do? You flunk him. And the guy you assign to do your leases, and your vehicles, is the guy from Harvard. He can't cut it and he doesn't want it. You've got to have an examination that will bring in both these people.

So I convinced the State Department that they had to score, as passing scores, each of the functional qualities. And no one could be appointed who did not pass that functional quality. And you would actually have people on the Admin register with the combined score of their English expression, the general background, the Admin score, and of course, their oral exam. And therefore you have a chance of capturing these people as Administrative Officers, or Economic Officers, or whatever. And the system, we tried it, put it into effect in 1980 and '81, and it worked very well and hasn't been changed until just recently. But the consequence of that is, that on the economic cone, there isn't a woman on it. In the Admin. cone, you get lots. Consular gets lots. Political, you get a fair number. But now, as I understand it, the women are saying, and the court has held, that the pass rate in economics must be the same for men and women. The pass rate in political must be the same. And in Consular, and Admin, and USIA, and everything else, must be the same. If you pass 20 percent of the men, you must pass 20 percent of the women. Not just on the overall exam, but in the functional fields.

Q: This is an impossibility, is it?

NEHER: No, you can do it. And I think what they're proposing to do now, is to do exactly that. They set a pass rate, 20 percent, and they pass 20 percent of the males, and 20 percent of the females, in each of the fields.

Q: But judged separately.

NEHER: Yes, judged separately.

Q: I mean it's the only way to do it.

NEHER: You score the women separately. You get a 70, and at that 70 and above, you got 20 percent of all the women who took that exam.

Q: But what you're saying though is, an acceptance of the fact that one group of people is going to be brought in who are not as pass eligible as another group.

NEHER: Yes. You may be passing women into a field where they have not shown the kind of interest. They may be talented, they may be bright, they may be able even to do the job as well as the males. But they have not shown by their course of studies in college, by their associations, and subscriptions, and interests, etc., their conversations with friends, they haven't shown that much interest. When they read Time Magazine, they don't read that article about the International Monetary Fund. That's what you're getting. It doesn't say that they will be less effective, but your assumption is that you can predict effectiveness in operation by the selection process. By looking at a person's background, by measuring it in the exam, you can predict effectiveness. Can you? I don't know.

Q: I have a real problem in that I've always been dubious about the effectiveness of the exam. The exam in many ways is a hurdle and you try to get some people over it, and then you take a look at them, and, of course, that even gets worse. Because if you start using

sort of the eyeball judgement, then you move into a field which probably is as effective as any written exam, but it's less easy to defend in a court situation.

NEHER: It's also hard to be sure that your standards are the same. Your examining team that's in San Francisco, and the one that's in New Orleans, and the one that's back here. These are oral exams being done and they're crucial. The oral exam still weighs 52 percent of your total score on your register. I've been in enough of those panels, and so have you, to know that one person strikes you as fine, and your fellow examiner says, “I wouldn't work with that person anywhere.”

Q: Yes, the chemical mix, of course. But there it is, that's life.

NEHER: It's interesting. As you see, I get fascinated by the problem and don't know that I have any solutions. But my system—I say “my system” because in fact it was mine. Nobody else started that thing with me. I started it up and I drew some charts, and I tried to convince my boss, and I sat in with ETS, and they all demurred and didn't want it. And I finally got together a constituency that said, “Fine. Let's do it.” And we did it. It took a lot of changes on the part of everybody but now that system the court has said, “Its got to go.”

Q: Let's move on to your final assignment.

NEHER: It wasn't the final. I went to INR.

Q: You went to INR. You were director for analysis for Africa. This was between '82 to '84. What was your impression of the African Bureau. Not the Intelligence and Research side, but the African Bureau. Its approach towards Africa. This would be under the Reagan administration, always a new administration's new look, and all that. What was your impression?

NEHER: The Reagan administration, dealing with Africa, was concerned about one problem only, South Africa. Assistant Secretary Chester Crocker had written an article

for Foreign Affairs that came out in the fall of 1980 just before the first election of Ronald Reagan, and it marked him as the person who really had something to say, had a strategy for dealing with Southern Africa, and that's why he was selected as Assistant Secretary. So during his time, that was the main preoccupation of the Reagan administration and the Africa Bureau; most of its resources were channeled into that. There were other things happening. For example, Chad. That was also one of the preoccupations too, about Qadhafi and his intentions, but South AFrica was where the focus was kept.

Q: Qadhafi of Libya was launching attacks against Chad.

NEHER: Right, and the United States was going to make an effort to see that he was frustrated, that he did not get his hands on Chad. There were other things happening in Africa. The severe drought in the Sahel was one of them, Then, you had to establish a pattern, a Reagan administration pattern, of dealing with a number of controversial people, like Mobutu. What do you do with Mobutu? How do you handle that relationship that's got real thorns in it? Generally, you have some kind of a cast to your policy on former French Africa. It isn't just an AID policy that effects Senegal, and Gabon, but you've got to have some kind of an approach and you begin to see traces of that in an administration like Reagan's.

In almost all of this I was a great admirer of the AF front office. Crocker had an intellectual capacity that was really very satisfying. Frank Wisner, too. They were an impressive pair at AF. Dealing with them, which I had to do every day because I briefed them...I took over the briefing...

Q: They used INR, he used...

NEHER: I took over a briefing every morning. I myself did the briefing; somebody else from INR had done the briefing of Crocker, Wisner, the front office in AF. I wanted to make sure that contact was there all the time, and if they had any problems with what we were producing, perhaps we'd discuss them. But we kept a distance from the policy

side of the house in order to preserve the integrity of the analytical process. When we had interpretations of events in Africa, problems we thought should be called to the Secretary's attention, we had done it without consulting them, and they had to read it in the morning traffic, and it worked out very well. I think that's probably why they finally said, “Want you as an Ambassador.” I think that was a kind of reward for our spirit of openness.

Q: You found that INR was being used?

NEHER: Oh, yes, very much. Not used in the sense of supporting policy. Our charter was never to support policy. Our policy was “tell it like it is” to the Secretary and the White House. For example, on constructive engagement...this was Crocker's policy—the term he used for his policy toward South Africa, and southern Africa. When we saw failures in that, we pointed them out. If Crocker didn't like it, he read memos we'd sent to the Secretary and sometimes they were saying, “Don't believe what AF is telling you. It isn't going to go this way. South Africa is not going to do this. They're not going to be forthcoming. They're going to resist. Botha can't control the army. He can't produce on this or that commitment that the Foreign Minister is making to Crocker.” So we told it straight, but we had a good, mutually respectful, relationship and it was appreciated by Crocker, by Wisner, and by us in INR.

Q: Well, now you were appointed as Ambassador to—you better pronounce it...

NEHER: Burkina Faso, very easy.

Q: ... which is old Upper Volta, and you served there from 1984 to '87. What was our interest in the area to begin with, American interests.

NEHER: At the time that I went, our interest was heavily slanted toward knowing what to do about this very radical, very troublesome country in West Africa. There'd been a coup there in 1983 that brought in some young military officers who had a Marxist vocabulary, and they were good friends of Qadhafi's, and they were up on the stage everyplace in the

world denouncing the U.S. and imperialism and siding with Cuba, the Soviets and with Nicaragua. The government had refused to vote to condemn the shooting down of the KAL airline. It refused to vote against...

Q: The Soviets had shot down a civilian airline flying over the Kamchatka peninsula.

NEHER: Right, and they had not voted to condemn the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. They had boycotted the Los Angeles Olympics in the summer of '84, ostensibly because a British team participating had made a tour of South Africa. But, in fact, as far as we were concerned, it was part of the alignment with the Soviet Bloc. The only other countries in Africa to boycott were Angola, Mozambique and Madagascar, all of them closely aligned with the USSR.

I helped to draft my own instructions, detailed instructions, and converted those eventually into objectives that I would try to attain there. They concentrated heavily on that problem of how radical is this country, what can be done about it, is there any meaningful dialogue we can have with a country like this? It's your job to go out and report back to us and tell us what to do, and to do something yourself. That was the main purpose for being there, and that was the charter I had.

Q: Do we have economic interests in the area?

NEHER: None.

Q: Was it a menace to any of the other countries around, destabilizing, or do we feel that they were exporting their revolution either by example or by actual use of force?

NEHER: Yes. There was always the tendency that it would move in that way, and it did move to a certain point. It erupted in a small border war with Mali in Christmas 1985 because of statements that the president, Captain Thomas Sankara, had made.

Q: He's the president of...

NEHER: He was the president. He was overthrown in '87. Although he contended always in public speeches that this revolution was for Burkina Faso, and could not be exported, he began to hear the applause of young people all over Africa when he showed up. Once, he went to a conference and there was more applause for him than there was for the head of state. It happened in Nigeria. When he went to places in Africa, almost anyplace he was going to be a speaker, he was the one who got the audience. He got the adulation of the crowd. So it began to go to his head a little bit, and there was a danger that he would try to export it. And there were his comments on Mali, and his invitation to the Malian people to get rid of that corrupt government in Mali. That really led to the war, and that sobered him up.

Q: What happened in the war?

NEHER: The moment the guns went off there, there was a skirmish, a series of skirmishes, so Burkina Faso did very well by itself. But the Malians were pretty inept, and they lost some tanks and some armored cars, but they did bomb one of the towns and killed some people in northern Burkina Faso. Immediately when Thomas Sankara looked around for allies, he found out that there was not one country in the world to back him; if he had trouble with Mali, he would have no allies whatsoever. Nobody, the French, the Libyans, the Ghanaians, nobody would be on his side. And so that gave him a jolt, and he drew back. But it was still a problem.

Of course, we did establish a good relationship, we had a good dialogue going, it was open, it was friendly. The newspapers stopped criticizing us. They were friendly, very supportive. When we had visitors to present we had big turnouts of people, government people participated in seminars and discussion groups, we had great access. When they wanted to denounce apartheid in South Africa they stopped putting the name of the United States on every sentence. They modified their hostility considerably.

Q: How did this come about? How did you operate? I take it at the time it was a very unfriendly situation.

NEHER: Terribly.

Q: How did you do it?

NEHER: Strategy and tactics. There were a lot of discussions here in Washington before I went there. What can I solve? What do I have to bring back? What do I take there? How much do I really have to confront this guy? I wanted to make sure that I didn't have to go out there and in the first meeting end the whole thing. I had a set of instructions that I helped to draft but AF made them too confrontational. The first set, which I needed to lobby against and tried to get changed, said, “When you go there, when you first call on Sankara, you will tell him the following: because of this, and this, and this, we're cutting your aid program.” I said if I do that, there's no point in my going there. I said, “What I want you to do is convert these into a set of guidelines. Give me some running room on this and I'll get the message across.” And they agreed, “Fine, okay. You go out and do this.” So on my first call on the president I took my DCM along as note taker—Bob Pringle, who is now in Mali. I wanted to make sure that we didn't compromise our message, so I told Pringle, I said, “When we go in there, if when we come out, no matter how long we're in there, he is smiling, and he is talking about future relations with us, we will have failed. He's got to be angry when we leave.” I set that as a guideline. I said, “When we go there, this guy has got to be hot when we leave. Because we have to go back to Washington in this cable, there's where my credibility lies.” And this is what we did, and at one point the president got up from his desk and said, “I don't have to be talked to like this. I don't have to listen to you. You can go.” I said, “Maybe you misunderstood or something.” We went back and we talked about it some more but we had such a hot exchange, some of his military aides came to the door of his office and stood outside. And that turned the thing around. He knew he wasn't dealing with...it wasn't a country that was going to roll over every time he yelled. It wasn't going to come through with aid programs for him on the basis of his need.

He was going to have to perform somehow. Even though he got that message, relations went down and down through...I got there in October and this went down—no, I got there in August—this was in October we had the big session with him. He had been out of town before that. Relations went down through that December and then finally in January...we cut in November one of his favorite aid programs. And we cut it with enough—not publicity — enough openness to show that it was deliberately being cut because of their conduct. It was a good program. It was a forestry reeducation program, and cut off all salaries. They wanted extensions, they wanted time to phase out, and we just said, “No, absolutely not. As of November 30 everything stops. No more funding. No completion of buildings. No aid. That's when the project ends.” When that thing really hit home they realized that, by God, we weren't the French. We weren't going to be there all the time.

One important event that helped to get things on a better basis was a visit of one of the Burkinabe leaders to Washington on behalf of president Sankara. He had orders to see the Secretary of State or even the President of the U.S., in the exaggerated notion of that country's importance. I sent a message to Washington saying that he should be received only at a very low level. I wanted Sankara to have to deal with me, not with Washington. And he was received by a Deputy Assistant Secretary who chastised him for the treatment the American Ambassador was getting in Ouagadougou. “That Ambassador wanted to go to Burkina Faso, he requested it because he was interested in the country and what was happening there. He sympathized with some of the goals of the regime,” or words to that effect as related to me later. So when he, Zongo, came back and reported to Sankara that I had actually requested the assignment to Burkina Faso, it made an impression on the president.

And in January then the president called me up and asked me to come to lunch. I took along the AID director as my note taker, and for two and a half hours he said, “We can't understand you. What do you want from us.” He spent two and half hours saying, “What do we have to do to have good relations with the United States?” And boy, that was the turning point, exactly what we all wanted. I went over the whole list of actions by his

government that bothered us. I told him about the press, the press handling of relations. Well, one of the attacks in the press was so bad that State sent me a back channel cable saying, “Does that mean that they're suggesting that you be assassinated?” Because the final line in one of their front page reports in the press said, “It's time to finish with this new guy as soon as we can,” something of that order. They said, “Hey, what does that mean?” I said, “No. They'd just like me to go somewhere else.” But at that session, it was a good frank one, and it was animated, but it was direct and I gave him a list of all these things that had to be done and I'll tell you, it turned around from then on, and at public sessions he'd call me over and talk with me, even showing a certain affection. The phone would ring at my house on a Sunday night and he'd say, “I just want to talk,” and we'd chat for a while. One time he called me over to his office and sort of asked me how things were going in his country. How do I see them? The way he's governing. I talked to him very candidly about that. One time I was going on a trip and I was leaving on a Monday morning, and the phone rang on Sunday night and it was President Sankara on the phone saying, “I just want to wish you a bon voyage, have a nice trip.”

One of the most fascinating and challenging aspects of the job was keeping Washington informed but bringing them around to see Burkina Faso as much less dangerous to U.S. interests than they thought. FBIS would carry remarks of the president or the leaders, full of marxist jargon and hot with attacks on the United States and its policies, and Washington would not understand what they really were, would take them at face value. Well, they sometimes meant just the opposite. Here was Thomas Sankara, self-taught mostly from marxist sources and with a marxist vocabulary. But he was a populist who was facing a serious threat, the only one, from a truly marxist left, people subsidized by one or another of the Eastern European regimes, or by China or North Korea. But because he contended that his “revolution” was the final socialist revolution, only those on the right could attack it. Nothing could exist on the left of a marxist regime. So he would denounce these real communists as bourgeois lackeys in the service of imperialism. And Washington would read that as a true communist attacking the moderate center. Try explaining that to

a conservative Reagan government when you have Jeane Kirkpatrick at the UN and some right wing ideologues at the NSC and AID. But I was blessed with two of the ablest DCM's anyone could have, both good writers, and we put out the stuff that cooled some of the ardor in Washington and allowed us to go ahead and develop a dialogue with this regime.

Things eventually turned around and we had good dialogue, good access, until about six months before I left. But with the air attack on Tripoli and Benghazi, that really just cut off conversations all over Africa but in my case it cut off my conversation with the president. And he was becoming more isolated. It led to his assassination in October. I left in August of '87 and he was assassinated in...

Q: Just to put it in context, we're talking about the air attack. There had been some, apparently a Libyan sponsored, terrorists attacks against American troops in Europe, and we bombed Libya from bases in England on this. This was when?

NEHER: This was '87.

Q: Which had an effect of slowing down at least Libyan activity, but it was not looked upon kindly elsewhere, particularly in Africa.

NEHER: At any rate, he began to be more isolated even from his own people, from his close advisers, supporters, and that's what brought about his downfall in October of '87.

Q: You were there at the time?

NEHER: No, I left in August—finished my tour in August, and it was in October that he was overthrown.

Q: Did you have the feeling...you'd made this turn around, but were there angry young Marxist type officers, or just radical officers who were sort of glowering and unhappy about this? If so, were there any sort of manifestations of this?

NEHER: The little political groupings that are still in existence there, all have names like The Union of Burkinabe Communists, The Union of Communist Struggle, and the Group of Communist Officers, etc., and they see themselves as radical Marxists. They see the United States as being the big imperialistic country. At the airport when you fly in there you look across the face of the airport, there's “Shame on Imperialism”. So you have that throughout the society. But at any rate, that was the end of my mission. I was asked to choose a date for leaving there, and I chose July 31st because of the date... (interruption) So it was exactly three years from the time I arrived.

Q: Before we leave that, was the government as such that if you got along with the president, you got along with everyone. I mean, there must have been all sorts of other problems dealing down at different levels?

NEHER: Yes. There were people who did not like the United States, and who did not want better relations with the United States, and you always had to deal with them. The head of the youth organization, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, went out of his way to try to harm relations with the United States, sometimes in very uncomfortable circumstances. Calling the Diplomatic Corps and sitting down at the table in the Foreign Ministry and just lambasting the United States and accusing it of all kinds of things, and here we are, the whole Diplomatic Corps. Just on and on and on, a major speech, impromptu but...so you're sitting there as the American Ambassador and you wait until it's your turn to speak, and saying, “Thank you very much for your kind words, but I don't really feel this is the forum in which I care to discuss policy, to make statements about the policy.”

Q: What about the role of the French there, having been a former French colony? Do the French still have a pretty major oar in that pond, or not?

NEHER: Yes, they're the big economic supporters, of course, Project Assistance. And they're the only ones doing budget support. They pay, in one form or another, for a lot

of the services, the teachers and other welfare activities, social activities, and a number of subsidiaries. And they're also very big on project aid. They put in something like $150 million a year, but their involvement is not the same as ours. They don't require these people to say nice things about them, they don't care what they say in the United Nations. They don't react the way we do. We have to, you know, we get our list out there. I mean every year the report cards on their performance in the UN, and we've got to go in and protest what they said about this, or they used this word, can they retract this word. It's silly, but we have to do it. The French don't care much about that. They want stability in the area, they want to make sure that this guy doesn't become troublesome for neighbors, or they want to keep things rocking along. They've got their monetary union, they don't want extravagancies there, they don't want chaos. They've got a few French commercial and business interests. A lot of French prestige in international forums is based on their ties with Africa, and they want to keep that. They don't really care much about these kinds of things. The Ambassador gets insulted, and the country gets insulted and there's no reaction at all.

Q: Looking back on this then, is there anything else we should talk about do you think about this that I might have left out, or didn't ask?

NEHER: I don't think so. I think we've covered it. These were the high points and in Burkina Faso, as you see we're concentrating on that one problem with stability, and how you get them to behave in a way that allows us to have dialogue with them, and allows us to continue our programs, very modest but we are there. We think that they're good people, and programs tend to succeed there better than they do in most other countries of Africa.

Q: More enterprising, more follow through.

NEHER: They're hard working people, there is less corruption in the place. There is real austerity, that is, no extravagance on the part of the leaders. They still run around in little

Renault 5s, or Volkswagen Jettas the Germans gave them. There are no great palaces, no luxury travel. Unfortunately there is a slight change in that policy. About four weeks ago there was a so-called attempted coup. I'm not sure there really was, but in which the two remaining survivors of the four, who took over in 1983, were killed—they were said to be executed. So now you have one. There's not going to be the brake on him on extravagancies, and so forth, that they had before. When Sankara was killed they had three, now they have one. It doesn't bode well for the country.

Q: Well, looking back on your career, what gave you the greatest satisfaction?

NEHER: The whole career. It's a happy career. Being able to travel all around the world, and raise a family, speak all kinds of languages, and having done work that at least was honorable work, and sometimes hard work, sometimes rewarding work. And had on top of that economic security, nothing elaborate, but at least security that's very comforting to have. The whole package, it was the right kind of life for me, exactly right. I couldn't have got into anything that was more suited to me, and more rewarding for me, than a career in the Foreign Service.

Q: The last question we ask of everyone we interview. A young person comes to you and says, "Mr. Ambassador, would you recommend the Foreign Service to me as a career today?"

NEHER: I would say the same thing I would have said years ago. It would depend on the individual. I would say that if you're a person who likes people, and who hears that appeal of travel, wants to see far away places with strange sounding names, and learn some languages, and see the world, and do work that is as good work, and sometimes will offer some real challenges to you. If you don't have to have your security blanket at the same house, and the same language, and the same city, sure.

Q: Okay. I thank you very much.

End of interview